

Oklahoma Council of Teachers of English
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Extreme Pop Culture Makeover
for Literary Analysis
by Kamrin Grissom

Exploring the Efficacy of Peer Groups
by Judith L. Steele

Book Talk: *Dark Life* by Kat Falls
by Eril Hughes

Book Talk: *Flight* by Sherman Alexie
by Mindie Dieu

For I Am Not a Tyrant
by Samantha J. Manuel

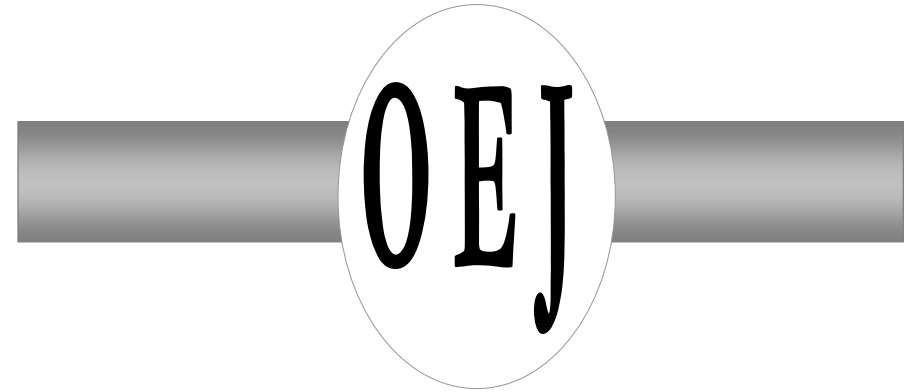
Oklahoma English Journal

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Call for Paper

receipt deadline

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SUBMISSION GUIDELINES

The *Oklahoma English Journal*, the official publication of the **Oklahoma Council of Teachers of English**, publishes articles of interest to English teachers and language arts instructors, regardless of teaching level.

- **Articles** should be theoretically based yet pedagogically applicable at a variety of levels, dealing with the teaching of writing, reading, or literature—generally or specifically—and should anticipate the needs of teachers at all classroom levels, elementary through college. Articles, including references and appendices, should be kept under 12 pages, although longer articles may be published when justified by substance and likely reader interest.
- **Book reviews** will be limited to books of likely professional interest to English teachers. Starting Fall 2008, a section dedicated to Young Adult Literature will begin.
- **Brief counterstatements** which respond directly to published articles will be considered for publication. Such counterstatements should be kept under 500 words.
- **Poetry and short essays** (e. g., *Teacher Voice*) will also be considered for special sections and should be brief and appropriate for our readership.

Submissions, not previously published, should be double-spaced with ample margins and include a brief bio of the author(s) at the end of the manuscript, along with a mailing address. They should follow current MLA format for attribution and citation and the *NCTE Guidelines for Non-Sexist Use of Language*.

Submissions should be sent electronically to trothrock@ecok.edu, using either a .doc or .rtf format. Queries can also be sent to this email address. Though hard copies are no longer accepted, the editor can also be reached at

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Extreme Pop Culture Makeover for Literary Analysis

by Kamrin Grissom

As a beginning teacher, I didn't have a grasp on how popular culture affected my students' learning until I taught *A Christmas Carol* during my first year. As we read the final scene in which Scrooge yells down from the window on Christmas Day to the young boy to buy a turkey, my students started a conversation that went something like this (Horovitz):

Student 1: "Hey! This is like the Little Caesar's commercial!"

Student 2: "Yeah! "Then buy some crazy bread and crazy sauce my boy!""

Student 3: "Miss Grissom, I can find the commercial on YouTube on my phone to show everyone."

It was in this moment I realized how engulfed my students were in popular culture. During the reading of the

drama, some of my students had a hard time visualizing what was happening. However, once they figured out they had already been introduced to a version of the play, the class let out a collective "Oh!" Additionally, we were able to compare the drama with the commercial because one of my students could easily access it through the technology on his cell phone.

A similar instance occurred in my classroom while teaching limericks. After reading an example of a limerick, a student informed me there was a *Spongebob Squarepants* episode that included our example. "Our students enter our classrooms with a world of information based on interests sprung from their

Activating my students' prior knowledge by using popular culture has made tasks easier for both my students who excel in reading as well as my low-level readers.

favorite novels, films, television shows, and musical arts; often they have built a kind of scholarly knowledge about

those areas of independent study” (Smith, Smith, and Bobbitt 10). My students bring a wealth of scholarly information that might not be academic, but this information is still shaping how they interact with the literary material they are exposed to in my class.

From this point on in my teaching, I have created an atmosphere in my classroom in which I intertwine popular culture with traditional skills to teach reading. I have found activating my students’ prior knowledge by using popular culture has made tasks easier for both my students who excel in reading as well as my low-level readers.

Some of the pop culture activities I use successfully in my classroom range from character and plot analysis to a new look at book reports. For all assignments, I took something from traditional literary analysis and gave it an extreme makeover, pop-culture style.

Character Facebook/Myspace

With the popularization of Facebook and Myspace, bringing in these writing mediums just seemed like a natural avenue. In my classroom, I ask students to analyze characters by creating a profile for either Facebook or Myspace. Students are not simply telling me what the character is like; they’re showing me. Students have to use higher-order thinking and infer for most of the information asked about the characters, thus allowing students to conduct a more in-depth analysis of a character.

For example, after reading the short story “Amigo Brothers” by Piri Thomas, Riley and her group created a Myspace profile for Felix. Felix is one part of a dynamic duo of friends in this short story. Both boys are aspiring pro boxers who grow up in the Bronx. The story centers on their decision to forfeit the championship game against each other in order to salvage their friendship (Thomas). Based on the characteristics in the novel,

Riley's group came up with a profile to capture Thomas's character. According to Riley's group, Felix's favorite music is Rock Metal; he uses this to get pumped up for his fights.

Additionally, Felix's favorite television includes ESPN and Boxing, and his favorite movies are the Rocky series. Riley's group also wrote an About Me in which

Unlike traditional methods of character analysis, my students created a piece, using a familiar medium of writing, showing their deep understanding of the character.

Felix talks about his best friend Antonio and their aspirations to become light-weight boxing champions. They also included shoutouts to his girlfriend, his religious preference, and a quote from the movie *Rocky* as one of Felix's favorite quotes. Riley's group also included pictures of Felix and his top friends, cut out

of magazines. In addition, they decorated his Myspace background like a boxing ring.

By using Myspace as a way to analyze the characters, Riley and her group had to use the characterization they learned from the story about Felix, and infer what music and movies he might like and who his friends would be. Unlike traditional methods of character analysis, my students created a piece, using a familiar medium of writing, showing their deep understanding of the character.

Using Twitter to Outline the Plot

Plot diagramming is something students in junior high should be able to do. However, giving students a worksheet to outline plot is boring. To revamp this more traditional method, I turned to the latest in technology networking sites: Twitter. Twitter is similar to Facebook in which people update statuses and let others know what is happening in their lives. With the

combination of Twitter and plot analysis of a novel or short story, students outline plot in a creative and familiar way.

During our novel unit for *Where the Red Fern Grows* by Wilson Rawls, I broke my students into groups. I provided each group with a series of chapters from the book to use for their project. Each group took their assigned chapters and created statuses, much like Facebook and Twitter, and essentially, titled the chapter.

Devon's group struggled a bit with this assignment because they were not particularly interested in a book about a country boy hunting raccoons. All my students have lived in Oklahoma City their entire lives, and some don't even know what a raccoon is. However, Devon and his group members *do* know what Twitter is, and through that avenue, I was able to engage them. Devon's group had three different chapters, a chapter in which Billy, the main character, travels to Tahlequah to retrieve his dogs, a chapter in which the dogs win the championship coon

hunt, and the final chapter of the book in which Billy's family moves from their country home into town (Rawls). At first, Devon's group wanted to create statuses like "Walking to Tahlequah" or "Yay! We won!" However, after I provided some examples from celebrity Twitter accounts, they quickly revised their statements. In the end, Devon's group settled on these final three Twitter posts:

- "So excited to go to the big city, God's country sure is beautiful! I can't wait to see my pups, it's funny my parents still don't know about this! LOL ;)"
- "OMG! I'm so proud of my little pups! They won the championship coon hunt! They're finally growing up, I'm proud of my doggies!"
- "☹ I'm sure gonna miss all this beauty from the tall sycamores to the magical red fern. I can't wait to slide down the big tube!"

In all of these Twitter posts, Devon's group was able to combine both events that happened in their assigned chapters as well as previous events, thus showing me they had an understanding of the whole novel.

When all groups were completed with their Twitter posts, we combined all the post onto a large poster. By doing this, my students and I were able to see a detailed summary of our novel, *Where the Red Fern Grows*. While titling a chapter is nothing new in the teaching of reading, by using Twitter, I made the assignment seem more student friendly and accessible. Finding something to engage my students was important, given their lack of excitement for the actual text. Essentially, I put a new spin on an old favorite in order to catch my students' attention, and it worked.

Book Breakdown: Using Dance for Literary Analysis

As a reading teacher, I came into a school that requires students to complete a book report four times every school year.

I'll never forget one parent email I received: "It's bad enough making them read a book, but to make them writing about it is ridiculous." It was then I realized I was battling not only my students' apathy, but parents, as well.

During my second year of teaching, I had a group of boys who loved to create hip hop dances. Andre and Jeremiah were two of my students particularly interested in dancing, and definitely *not* interested in reading. They would stroll into my class after lunch with a swag only sagging skinny jeans can give, and always were talking about the latest underground hip hop dance or song. On "Meet Your Teacher" night before school started, Andre told me, "Just so you know from the jump...I hate reading." I knew I would have to hook Andre and Jeremiah into reading through what they loved: dance.

It was then I realized I was battling not only my students' apathy, but parents, as well.

When I announced my Book Breakdown option for their book report, I pulled both Andre and Jeremiah aside after class and told them if they brought me something amazing, like I knew they could, I would use it as an example for other classes and presentations I give for other teachers. For this assignment, I asked students to choreograph a dance using a genre of their choosing (hip hop, ballet, lyrical, jazz), and use it to depict their novel. I wanted students to tell the story through dance. To give examples, I showed YouTube clips from the popularized *So You Think You Can Dance* television show, and we talked about how each dance tells a story. Students chose music depicting the mood of their novel; I gave them free rein on music choice as long as it was school appropriate and the edited version. Additionally, students had to create costumes based on a character, or multiple characters, in the novel. For the writing portion of the novel, I asked for written explanations for the choreography, song, and

costumes, explaining how they connect to the novel using textual evidence.

When Andre and Jeremiah performed their dance for my class, it was one of my proudest teacher moments. Both boys read *Bronx Masquerade* by Nikki Grimes. The novel follows many different characters as they grow through poetry through an open mic day a teacher holds once a week (Grimes). I knew Andre and Jeremiah would come up with something amazing, but I never expected what I saw. The boys chose a mix of different hip hop songs mixed in with the spoken poetry of Tupac Shakur. Additionally, they had layered their costumes, and with each new character, they shed a jacket or hat. Needless to say, as they danced, I could visually see their comprehension of the novel. Additionally, each boy turned in the entire writing assignment, *on time*. The previous three book reports had been turned in late, so having their assignment on time was a feat in itself.

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Through combining my book reports with dance, I tapped into Andre's and Jeremiah's prior knowledge, which made them feel safe. Additionally, I was able to include a multiple intelligence approach to literary analysis. "When students are

given the opportunity to discuss and write about their own interests, and when their knowledge and opinions are given weight in assignments, students feel more comfortable with writing instruction and more confident in their own writing" (Smith, Smith, and Bobbitt v). I also allowed them to experience a book unlike they ever had before because they were invested in the project.

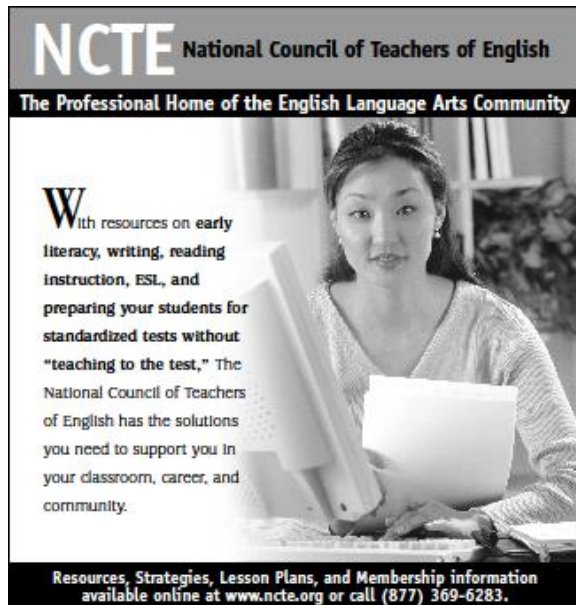
As a result of my infusion of my students' popular culture in the classroom with traditional literary analysis, not only did it help bridge learners from the unfamiliar to the familiar, but it also

showed my students I valued their interests. "To scorn the pop culture of teens as unworthy of serious attention is to underestimate not only adolescents' need for peer-group identity but also the way popular culture influences 'high' culture" (Witkin 31). Because I show an interest in their personal lives, my students automatically feel as though they are valuable members of my classroom. Additionally, students use higher-order thinking in order to understand how their outside world connects with their academic world. "Those teachers who ignore the pop culture of adolescents deprive themselves of a valuable barometer of adolescent expression and useful *persona grata* in the classroom" (Witkin 31). Like the outburst while reading *A Christmas Carol*, my students often enrich my lessons through their personal experiences with music, television, and movies outside my classroom. Through the addition of popular culture, my classroom transformed from a normal everyday classroom to a learning community in which the students and teacher learn from each other.

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Exploring the Efficacy of Peer Groups

by Judith L. Steele

Coming to teaching from a corporate public relations position as an experienced professional writer, I thought I was well equipped to teach students to write. In the corporate arena, I believed in the usefulness of discussion groups, and had implemented and led many such sessions in the work place. I had developed and directed a college internship program in the company for which I worked. My corporate interns were communications or English majors, and all planning careers in communications, so were extremely motivated to develop high-level writing skills. If they did not meet the standards within the three-month internship period, they were not considered as future employees.

As I entered the field of education, I learned that one of the challenges in teaching writing is to lead and engage students in

collaborating in meaningful and productive ways to discuss and assess their own writing. I found that educators generally supported peer discussion groups as useful ways for students to learn in a

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collaborative environment. In my naiveté, I felt confident that my college students would also benefit from the sort of discussion groups I had practiced in my profession. However, I soon realized that many of my perceptions from corporate life were not germane to academic life.

As a new teacher, the peer groups I first organized in the classroom did not result in the outcomes I expected. I was unaware of some solid theories of how to structure and conduct peer-learning groups. It seemed that college students tended to view these groups as a social session, often making only a pretense of discussing the task, and only got on task when I approached their group. I quickly realized that I did not know

enough, and in order to learn how better to construct peer groups, I did some action research to find out how educators view these groups and what I might do with better success.

I first focused on the outcomes that I was getting from peer discussion groups in my own classroom. I observed that the discussions in my English composition classes often did not seem to stimulate students or improve their learning. I was particularly frustrated that the groups proved to have marginal benefit in improving student writing. Although I was aware that other factors certainly could affect that pendulum of improvement, I did not feel that peer groups provided any positive effects.

I decided to inquire of my colleagues at the university to ascertain whether their experiences were similar to mine. I took an informal poll of faculty members who taught classes where writing was a significant factor (*See Appendix). Overall, respondents said they considered peer groups worthwhile, and that such groups provide opportunities for students of various temperaments to express themselves. However, they also agreed that peer groups could be problematic, citing issues in the same

areas in which I had trouble, such as students in individual groups getting off topic as soon as the teacher moves on to the next group, and general lack of focus or interest in the specific task at hand.

As I began researching peer groups, I found that I was making some invalid assumptions and was operating from a distinct lack of knowledge. I began to read journal articles and canvassed educational and social group websites to learn about the composition of and issues pertaining to peer groups. This research, coupled with the survey of colleagues on the general education faculty of our university, has provided some enlightening information on the structure, content, and outcomes of peer discussion groups.

I began by looking how peer groups are typically organized, and the importance they have to various educators and institutions. Erika Lindemann stresses the act of writing as an important social interaction (32). She advocates student-centered classrooms that direct students to engage in writing as an ongoing

process (33). By sharing ideas, successes and failures within groups, students make observations, learn from each other in personal interaction, and widen their cultural experiences, which broaden their awareness of the similarities and differences among people in the larger world. Lindemann states that the collaborative projects and group work students engage in helps their “writing emerge from their own interests and accomplishes

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goals they have defined for themselves” (34).

Other educators have found that peer groups are

not as effective as composition theorists would have it. Betty Bamberg’s essay on revision (Clark 122) revealed that the student-led peer response groups that Peter Elbow touted in his 1989 work “Sharing and Responding,” were not, by his own admission, as effective in practice as they were in theory, and that

Elbow himself later used a more structured and directed approach to peer groups (123). Another educator, Tim Hacker, found better results by first holding conferences and modeling desired outcomes of peer groups to students before they actually participated (112).

Some universities make peer groups an integral part of the curriculum. The Iowa State University Center for Excellence in Learning and Teaching stresses the importance of setting goals for the discussion groups, as well as the parameters of an assignment. (Haugen). Students become actively involved at the beginning of each new project or unit. The Center's premise is that the stronger members of a group will often provide leadership and spur the confidence of the weaker members. The desired outcome of the discussion groups is that all students will be on the same page.

Successful peer discussions carry the expectation that students should be able to express why an assignment is important, how they will demonstrate their knowledge, and include a reflection on various aspects of an assignment. The

Center focuses on ways for students to gain more insight into how they can become more responsible for their own learning, as well as their group's success. Peer groups are also scheduled after a project or unit is completed and students are asked to include reflection on the components of a project or unit that allows them to assess their contribution. Erika Lindemann suggests that peer groups can turn students from knowledge-sharers into knowledge-makers. She says a teacher would reach this goal by

establishing peer groups in my writing class, designing a sequence of tasks that gives the groups increasing responsibility for creating knowledge together, modeling the kinds of work I want the groups to do, discussing how groups work effectively, asking students to examine how their own group functions, holding conferences with groups to assess progress, and so on. (107)

Reflecting on the make-up of these various student groups and on my research, I realized that I, not my students, was often the reason for the lack of success in the peer groups I assigned. I

had been asking students to create an output with insufficient input. I had been organizing my class peer group sessions in only one way, rather than providing specific learning outcomes. My groups had mostly consisted of assigning peer group discussion with only general guidelines, such as “identify and discuss the separate elements of the essay, including thesis and support points.” I also had been dividing the class into student groups with no clear awareness of how I was organizing the students. I expected too large a final product for any single group discussion, and I did not give the students individual responsibilities within the groups. I realized that I needed to be more careful in organizing these groups so that students would find the activity more meaningful. I also made students accountable for earning points towards their grades.

There is a variety of ways to organize objectives for peer groups. One approach is to include several peer group discussions for a single learning unit or project. Instead of giving students a printed guideline sheet for the assignment and sending

them off to complete it, I now provide an opportunity for a several peer group discussions based on a single unit. A first group allows students to express their perception of what the assignment entails. This gives students the opportunity to discuss and sort out questions or confusion they have before doing the assignment, which can stave off a whole set of problems. The group session allows students to clarify questions that individuals have, but which they cannot or are reluctant to express. Each successive group session can address a single specific purpose, and allow students to exchange information and build on their

Taking any assignment in small portions for separate group discussions can also provide time for students to assimilate and comprehend the task, which boosts student success in the final product.

grasp of the entire project as they go through various stages of discussion.

Single session peer groups can work effectively for daily lessons, such as asking students to do some

reading aloud within their groups, and then take turns verbally summarizing the content of certain passages. They might be given an amount of time for silent reading of specific passages, and then held responsible for sharing individual insights; or perhaps they can be asked to limit discussion to specific questions based on intended purpose and content of a work, and then share their answers with the class. Any of these, and other, specific group goals, would support better understanding and performance within a peer group.

Another weakness in my earlier peer groups was not considering individual accountability, which affected the group negatively in what it could accomplish. Some students may have read or done the required assignment; others probably had not. I became aware of the need to structure our group discussions based on more specific goals and to structure the task to include all

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students, not merely the more reliable ones. Solutions include having group members each taking a turn as the group moderator, or each group member evaluating and assigning a certain number of points to all other members.

As well, the responsibility for both individual and group assessment is an important component. Students take discussion groups more seriously if they receive a grade for their part in discussion or for creating a summary or other documentation for a demonstrated outcome of each peer group session. Assigning specific and individual roles, as well as group outcomes, is important for both participation and individual student success. Taking any assignment in small portions for separate group discussions can also provide time for students to assimilate and comprehend the task, which boosts student success in the final product.

Since implementing some of these strategies, other benefits of peer groups are evident. Small group discussion can help students to work together and to maximize each other's learning.

Different learning styles among a group give its members the opportunity to both observe and participate in student-led efforts that result in student-created knowledge. Students are more confident and willing to participate if they are clear as to the purpose of the discussion, what exactly is expected of them, and they take the group more seriously when they know they will be both individually and collectively held accountable for a specific outcome that, in turn, will be assessed.

Just as a writing project is completed in a series of stages, so, too, should a discussion group be carried out in progressive steps. As a teacher, I needed to teach students what a peer group discussion group really is and what it is not. The teacher must let students know that peer discussion is serious class work, and not time to trade dating stories or discuss the latest basketball game. A peer group discussion has a learning purpose and must have a specific outcome.

Now, when I assign a writing project, instead of asking students to discuss the whole process in one group session, I

create several discussion groups that each have a different purpose that applies to that project or unit. Any one unit or assignment can involve more than one group discussion. By breaking up the timeline, stages, or components of a project or unit, peer groups are more useful to the students, save class time, and allow students more varied opportunities to grasp concepts and to plan and share ideas. I have found students more receptive to new units of study, and their participation is more energetic as they become knowledge-makers.

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Appendix

Results of an Informal Survey of Mid-America University Faculty, College Arts and Sciences, Regarding Efficacy of Peer Groups

Members of the faculty of the College of Arts and Sciences were canvassed in the areas of science and math, social science and family counseling, teacher education, and English. The number of professors who participated represented 27% of the faculty.

Anecdotal responses to the questions follow:

1. Are peer groups beneficial? If so, how?

- Yes responses, with comments; no negative responses given:
- A good way to get the students to know each other; breaks the ice at the beginning of the semester.
- Students can explain concepts to each other.
- Groups promote discussion.
- Help students develop a sense of curiosity.
- Allow professor to judge participation among students. Encourage participation.
- Provide for ideas and exchanges that differ from the professor's point of view
- They break the monotony of lecture

2. Are peer groups a good use of class time?

- Yes, if time limits are given. Imposing time restrictions helps maintain focus and structure.
- Yes, but only if they are guided by a specific goal and their duration regulated.
- Sometimes. The professor must...provide the group with ...parameters, and if students are not on topic, the professor should make sure students have the information or understand the purpose.

3. Are peer groups productive from students' points of view?

- Team projects are not usually productive – many students hate group assignments; one person (often) does all the work.
- Students enjoy the interaction if they deem the topic to be important or interesting; sometimes they are not in the mood and don't want to interact.
- Students feel their opinions are more valued in small groups.
- As a teacher, I am not sure how productive my students see groups.

4. Do peer groups enhance learning?

- Yes, they can facilitate learning directly.
- Yes, they encourage a sense of community. ...they provide an opportunity to value an insight a peer has.

- Yes. Students are more likely to stretch in their thinking and their ability to come up with a creative response.
- Yes, peer groups diminish the fear of being intimidated in front of the other students

5. Do you have problems keeping students on task in peer groups?

- (I see) problems with athletes talking about sports and blowing off learning-focused activities in general; the frequent and usual discussions that are off-topic of the purpose of the group.
- When peers work together over the course of a semester in the same small group, they become familiar and like each other. As a result, they work faster and have more time to have casual conversation. Time restraints are helpful in managing getting off topic. (However,) peer groups create a sense of cohesion, which can be negative as well as positive.
- Students who respond most often in the class as a whole are also the ones who do the runt of the discussion in small groups.

6. What elements contribute to a positive peer group discussion?

- Have a designated leader.
- A peer group has to challenge students to think and be creative. Sometimes (students) really need to be pushed in order to get started. Once they start, they tend to get into it.
- The teacher needs to roam the room and listen and offer help and let (students) know that they are expected to be actively engaged in conversation.
- Assign roles. Different responsibilities make students more accountable.
- Student preparation; group focus and group leadership; dedication of the students to the task.

7. How do you assign students to groups?

- Groups are based on proximity of the seating arrangement
- Draw numbers or random choosing
- Based on academic strength of those who are more capable, grouped with the less capable
- Composing groups by careful selection takes more of the teacher's time.
- I like to have at least two bright, talkative students in each group to spur the conversation
- I modify the arrangement based on personalities or head count
- I use specific criteria, such as personality styles or learning levels. I also choose draw numbers or choose randomly.
- I separate known buddies. I often create a group with a potential leader in mind, although the results are often worse than random selection.


8. Do you give handouts or guidelines? If so, how effective are they?

- A structured approach is best.








- A group works best with a specific handout. They need to see the discussion as purposeful.
 - Yes. Only if a group is very comfortable with each other will participants take a topic and give free discussion to it.
 - I get more information when a group has to create something or fill out a discussion sheet or draw a diagram, mind map, etc.
 - I always have something specific designed for group work.
- 9. Do students like peer group work?**
- It depends on the assignment. In class, I think they like them. I haven't asked.
 - I think they like peer groups. Some see it as a way to not be singled out. Others see it as an opportunity to talk or as a break from lecture. Students who do the work do not like to have other members contribute little or nothing.
 - They like it better than discussing as a whole class. Some of them take advantage and just chat. They must be held accountable.
 - It varies by students, but they are usually well received.
- 10. Do students think they have learned something from peer group work?**
- I think group structured activities are really employed in an effort to engage those who are more marginal in their abilities or at risk of failure; or to get to students who do not have a history of responding positively or productively to individual approaches. The good students are going to be good students no matter how the instruction is approached.
 - Students who do the work learn something. Others learn little.
 - I usually give a quiz over the discussion group content or have a review. I can then tell if they have learned. The students who are responsible for discussion on certain, assigned content usually remember the concepts better, because they associate it to their prior knowledge and personal involvement.
 - They usually learn something, but it may not have been what I have been striving for. However, learning is more important than following the agenda.

Judith Steele has taught English Composition, English Literature, Creative Writing and English Grammar courses at Mid-America Christian University since 2003.

**NCTE Announcement: Gallery of Writing
is open until June 2011.
Help us reach our goal of 100,000 pieces.**


National Council of Teachers of English

The National Day on Writing The National Gallery of Writing

October 20, 2009

The National Council of Teachers of English invites you to explore and celebrate the integral role writing has in each of our lives by participating in the National Day on Writing/National Gallery of Writing.

WHO?
Everyone! We encourage everyone to submit a piece of writing: students, teachers, parents, grandparents, service and industrial workers, managers, business owners, legislators, retirees, and many more.

WHAT?
A National Day on Writing—October 20, 2009 and a National Gallery of Writing where you can contribute any type of writing composition that matters to you.

WHEN?
October 20, 2009 is the big day, but don't let that stop you from participating NOW. The National Gallery of Writing is open for submissions and Local Partner Galleries are being formed in anticipation of the big day.

WHERE?
Online at www.galleryofwriting.org and in small towns and large cities nationwide. Writing is for everyone and is everywhere.

WHY?
Because we, as a nation, are writing like never before—through text messages and IMs, with video cameras and cell phones, and, yes, even with traditional pen and paper. Whether it is done in a notebook or on a blog, writing, in its many forms, has become daily practice for millions of Americans.

HOW?
Help us put writing front and center by:

- Starting a Local Gallery: Curators wanted. You can start a local gallery for your classroom, your town, or your civic group. Once your gallery is established, you can solicit writing on any topic or theme you'd like—the possibilities are endless!
- Contributing Your Writing: Writers come from all walks of life, and everyone has something important to share.

Upload your writing—whether it's a story, a video montage, an audio file, or a photo—to the gallery of your choice.

- Celebrating Writing Nationwide: Join us—and thousands of other Americans—as we declare October 20, 2009 the National Day on Writing. Events are being planned nationwide on this day. For more information on how you can help celebrate, visit www.ncte.org/dayonwriting.

GET STARTED TODAY at www.ncte.org/dayonwriting

Book Talk: *Dark Life*

by Dr. Eril Hughes

Falls, Kat. *Dark Life*. New York: Scholastic Books, 2010. 297 pages. ISBN: 978-0-545-17814-3. \$16.99.

This highly imaginative young adult novel opens with fifteen-year-old Ty looking over the edge of a deep-sea canyon, hoping to see fallen skyscrapers or maybe even the Statue of Liberty. In his world, the ocean waters have risen, and a slice of the East Coast of the former United States has fallen into this canyon.

The author Kat Falls has created a wondrous, yet believable, world in her first novel, for readers can immediately understand how land is at a premium in this overpopulated world. Adults can only achieve their dreams of owning land at the bottom of the sea. Ty's parents, who were among the first settlers, cultivate

kelp and raise fish, which they sell topside for the land-dwellers.

Readers encounter just one wonderful detail after another as they are drawn into this wonderful world: the fish are contained by fences made of air bubbles and where the flexible jellyfish-shaped homes are adapted to withstand pressures of the deep seas. The pioneers can even swim without air tanks by taking air-filled liquid into their lungs!

This wonderful world is also a dangerous one. One underwater farm is raided by outlaws, and Topside orphan Gemma gets into trouble at every turn as she enters this undersea world on a quest to find her brother. Ty befriends Gemma and tries to help her learn more about undersea living, and of course, their developing relationship adds interest to the fast-moving plot. Gemma's appealingly bold personality certainly adds to the book, and her stubbornness leads the plot into several interesting turns.

One important hidden danger also exists in this world, for pioneer children develop Dark Gifts. At a young age, Ty began to develop a special ability--which I will not tell another word about so readers can find out for themselves! After his concerned parents send him topside for three traumatic months of medical testing, Ty was able to persuade his parents that his ability somehow went away. Typical teenager? Yes and no!

Readers will not want to miss the cliff-hanger ending where the climax depends upon Ty's gift and the gifts of other children who grew up undersea. (Oh yes, I mustn't forget to say that dolphins play a role in the exciting last scene!)

In the end, there is no longer a clear distinction between good characters and bad ones, but making the distinction does become a matter of life and death--both for the characters and for their world. Born from the vast imagination of author Kat Falls, this book is not to be missed! This is nothing less than a classic in the making.

Dr. Eril Hughes is an English professor at East Central University and a longtime and active member of OCTE.

Book Talk: *Flight*

by Mindie Dieu

Alexie, Sherman. *Flight*. New York: Black Cat, 2007.
208 pages. ISBN 10:0-8021-7037-4. \$14.00.

"Zits" is a kid in a foster home. Actually, he's in several foster homes. He lives in Seattle. His mother died when he was little, but his dad abandoned them both when he was born.

Zits is an angry kid. Besides living in several foster homes, he was also in juvenile hall. He's poor. He's got a bad attitude and a habit of setting fires when he's pissed off. Nobody seems to be on his side. He would love to have a clear face, but the wash and medicine are too expensive. Everything he has learned in his life he learned from television. He loves the History Channel and music and pop culture. Zits lands in jail and meets a boy named Justice, who convinces him to take a paint gun and a real gun into a bank and start shooting.

What happens next is magical and mystical and, at times, historical. It's like the 1980's television show, *Quantum Leap*. Zits

jumps out of his body and into that of a federal agent in the 1970's as well as into the Battle of Big Horn from the eyes of a would-be child warrior, and also from the body of an aging cavalry tracker. Then suddenly, Zits leaps into an airline pilot's life, one who carries the guilt of having trained a terrorist as a pilot. His final leap, before becoming himself once again, is into the body of his own father. Zits learns the real reason for leaving and the reader learns the real story of Zits' life.

Finally, Zits comes back to himself and sees himself and the people around him as human and deserving of their own lives. He does not shoot anyone and turns himself into the police. A friendly police officer—who has seen too much of what Zits has experienced—cannot leave him there. There is redemption in the closing chapters as Zits finds a family where his new mom gives him Proactiv and shows him gently how to use it. Then she hugs him and tells him it's going to be ok as he cries and asks to be called by his real name, which is Michael.

While the protagonist is a teenager, *Flight* does not sit comfortably in the category of young adult literature. Rather, it straddles the line between adult fiction and young adult. It's got some violence—Zits was abused and he wants to lash out. People brutalize and murder each other all through the book, and the violence is used to teach Zits what humanity really is. In places, it's very funny. It also comes with a reader's guide. Older students might like it, but younger or struggling readers might not. Some English teachers read it with their classes as an introduction to *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. Themes include alienation and belonging, history and its inaccuracies, alcoholism, foster care systems, sexual abuse, drug use, and physical abuse. It is about an Indian kid who is ultimately accessible because of his teenage angst, his wit, and his immersion in pop culture.

Flight can teach us about audience. It was Sherman Alexie's first attempt at writing a young adult fiction novel. There were

few, if any, young adult novels about Indians before this, and the author admits to struggling with the resolution. It ends too neatly and solves every problem. Zits gets everything he ever wanted out of life. What was the alternative? Judging by the path Zits was on at the beginning of the journey, without divine intervention, his end would be quickly and brutally met.

While not Alexie's best work, *Flight* is funny, sarcastic, and along the lines of what readers have come to expect from this author.

Mindie Dieu is an English Education doctoral student at the University of Oklahoma and has taught at universities, community and technical colleges, and even in prison.

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Check out the OCTE web site for all the latest news:
<http://octe.ecok.edu/>

2011 Spring Conference

Carolyn Forché

*poet of witness
& human rights advocate*

Oklahoma City University

Wednesday, April 13, 2011

check octe.ecok.edu for details

CORRECTION: This poem appeared in the Spring 2010 *Oklahoma English Journal*. Unfortunately, it was erroneously attributed to Stephanie Manuel. It is being reprinted here, crediting its rightful poet Samantha J. Manuel. The *Oklahoma English Journal* apologizes for this mistake.

For I Am Not a Tyrant

by Samantha J. Manuel

Half-eaten spinach frittata, smooth ricotta cheese,
Smartwater with a missing cap—
I pick the gum from the sole of my shoe.
Maybe I should organize all of these papers.

They bustle in from gym.
Thank God Caribbean Salsa drifts from the oil burner,
Dances around the paper lanterns and bamboo plants—
I huff it like an addict.

Disaster awaits my nostrils just beyond my desk—
Shakespeare turns green in his tacked home.
The ponytail palm gasps for fresh air.

I step outside my box
Into a dangerous world of sweat, drinking tales, and intrusive cell phones.
Funny how five years and thousands of dollars has landed me here—
Small town, Oklahoma.
But wait.

They seem so eager.
Smiling eyes and gleaming teeth—
What are we gonna do today, Miss Sam?
I glance through the window to the warm autumn day that beckons us to
join it.
Maybe a lesson surrounded by nature,
That beauty seeps through the pages that they flip with jagged-nailed
fingers—
Soothes a hungry soul.

Too bad that one couldn't keep his pen to himself.
The other flinches and rubs his cheek.
Choice words fly from his mouth, luckily not directed at the antagonist—
At the pain.
I could be raising my voice,

Could be storming down the hall with a muscular arm clenched in my tiny
fingers, but...
This is a democracy!

A motion for the pen-chunker to stand—
What do you think we should do to punish him?
Burn him!
A roar of laughter and sharp smacks on table tops
Not a bad idea but...
As tempting as that may be, I would suggest a consequence that actually
fits the crime—

One raises his hand—
Maybe he should have to throw the pen at the wall for the rest of class.
A bit childish, but so is tossing objects at others,
And a vote settles his case.
This jury of peers sends the aggressor to the corner—

Open your minds now.
This is my favorite quote—tell me how you feel.
In your journal now.
This is Upton Sinclair.
This is our jungle.
Make it interesting.

I remember why I love this.
You boys are seventeen
And I a portal to the outside.

This classroom is open for discussion, creativity, and responsibility—
I can teach you how to read, write, and analyze.
I can teach you amazing facts about these American authors.
I *want* to show you how life happens,
How words live.

Learning cannot end with a book.

I scan over the mess of unruly hair to the desk from which I will never
teach,
And the pen strikes the wall again.

Samantha J. Manuel is a preservice English Education teacher at East
Central University in Ada, Oklahoma.
