

Putting Characters First in a Middle School Classroom

A sixth-grade English teacher shares traditional and technology-rich activities that encourage students to forge personal connections with characters, such as Percy Jackson and White Fang.

Mean girls, trying to fit in, bad skin. Many of my middle school memories consist of these cringe-worthy details, but they also consist of wonderful literary characters and escapes. Even though I was afraid to be who I was in middle school, I lived vicariously through characters who were unapologetically themselves. On my bad days I channeled Scarlett O'Hara's mantra, "After all, tomorrow is another day" (Mitchell 1037), and when I pondered my future, I connected to Francie Nolan's dream of becoming a writer.

Before I met Scarlett and Francie, I clung to Nancy Drew as my ideal. She was perfect; not only was she attractive, but she could do anything. She spoke multiple languages, golfed, played tennis, found sunken treasure, rescued kidnap victims, deciphered codes, and, no matter what she said or did, was well-liked by everyone. A few years ago I found *Rediscovering Nancy Drew* (Dyer and Romalov) in a used bookstore. At the time, I was a newly minted middle school teacher, eager to find books to fill my classroom collection and characters for my own students to idolize. I was sidetracked immediately by the book, and through teary eyes I read of women across all generations who attributed their successes and identities to the blue-eyed sleuth: "Women in many occupations told of learning from Nancy to see adventure in solving problems and the joy of self-reliance. These qualities, they said, led them to the futures they chose as lawyers, researchers, librarians, and detectives, among other roles" (Dyer and Romalov 6). I, too, saw how some of Nancy's

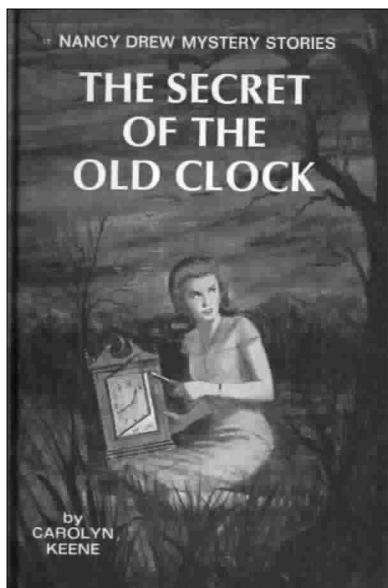
traits, such as self-reliance and need to problem solve, manifested themselves into my adult identity, and that vision reminded me of the young girl who read every word about Nancy and thought about her own future.

At that moment, I knew my future mission: Find other stand-out characters and help the students in my middle school classroom create similar connections.

Connecting with Characters

One of the most important aspects of developing a close, personal relationship with literary characters is *relevancy*. Readers have to find something to connect with in characters to care about them, and for that connection to take place, stories and their characters have to be relevant in the eyes of an adolescent to the point where they can assign their own individual meaning (Blackford 21). I wanted to find ways to make the characters from a variety of genres and settings come across as relevant to my classroom full of sixth graders so that they could create their own lists of memorable characters.

I met Scarlett O'Hara, Francie Nolan, and Nancy Drew in my reading outside of school. The characters I encountered in the classroom were definitely memorable, but they didn't stick with me the way those three did. Much of my experience in language arts focused on the literary elements of theme and mood; the characters were just a means to an end. I wanted to make the characters the main focus, and to do that I had to find a way for my



The 1966 cover of the revised version of *The Secret of the Old Clock*, the first Nancy Drew mystery.

students to connect with a variety of characters and share in those characters' experiences.

I teach three sections of sixth-grade English and a section of enriched sixth-grade English. Each of those groups reads four novels and a biography. These assigned books may have characters that some students connect with, but they may not be a match for everyone. To find a match for each student, I give a book talk on a new book each Monday right after I have talked about our agenda for the week. Each book's title, author, and genre are listed on a whiteboard in my classroom along with its first sentence. I hold the book up as I talk about my experience with it and ask if anyone else in the room has read it. If so, I ask them for their review of the book. Afterwards, I read the first few pages to try to hook the students. My recommendation of a book creates an instant connection if the student *chooses* to read the book; however, in a middle school language arts classroom, a book that is dictated rather than chosen can have the opposite effect. I want the characters to be memorable in a good way, and in planning a novel study, I put the characters first.

Make a Good First Impression

My students are focused on themselves and each other. They notice when another student gets a new haircut, does well on a test, or has a bad day be-

cause the evidence is obvious to them. There's visual evidence, such as shorter hair, a red A, or a pair of slumped shoulders. But when they read about a character, these details are not always as clear to them. My students miss the details that they would notice about an ordinary person. They're not used to paying attention to a literary first impression, and so when we start a new book together, I walk them through their first impression of a character.

I recently did this with *The Lightning Thief* by Rick Riordan. Before we opened the book, I followed Kelly Gallagher's suggestion of focusing on the reader. Gallagher writes, "When we read something new, we are much more likely to understand it if we see connections that make it relevant" (27). To help students engage with a character, I likened it to a time when the students met a new person: the first day of school when they met me. I started by describing the day and how the students walked into my room to find their names on the whiteboard with numbers next to them, which indicated where they would sit. Then I introduced myself, took attendance, talked about expectations, and brought them out in the hallway for locker practice.

It's at this point that I stopped. "So what'd you think of me when you first met me?"

There was a pause before a brave soul raised his hand. "You seemed nice."

"Seemed?" I scoffed, which caused some laughter. "Why did you think I was nice?"

The conversation became more critical at this point, as students shared examples and more adjectives—some not as kind as *nice*—about their first impression of me. I'm amazed at the details they remembered: the tone of my voice, a rule that I over-emphasized, the mispronunciation of someone's name, my movements, and even my outfit.

When I had enough self-deprecation, I moved on to our novel. "In a few moments, you will meet a character named Percy and form an impression of him. Please watch for those same details that helped you to form a first impression of me, like the things I said and did."

We read the first three pages and stopped. Slowly, we talked through the information that had so far been given. First, Percy is telling the story, and he offers us a lot of details. For instance, he's troubled, a "half-blood," and twelve years old. He goes to a private school, which makes the kids won-

der if he is rich. Even his name is telling because *Percy* is short for Perseus, like the Greek hero. The sixth graders also suspected that Percy likes his Latin teacher because the book says he has high hopes for a field trip. Next, we went beyond and focused on the impression Percy is making: What do you think of him? The students identified him as street smart and think that he knows more than he's telling. They were curious about what a "half-blood" is, and the group also thought that there is something sad or maybe even angry about him. The students deemed Percy as an unhappy character. At the end of our conversation, I told them that we were going to keep an eye on Percy. We were going to get to know him better.

This initial introduction to Percy cemented him in my students' minds. They met him and formed an impression. To build on this foundation, after each reading assignment, I checked in on Percy: "So tell me about what's happening in Percy's life." Immediately hands rose, and we were off talking about his adventures. The more the students read about Percy Jackson and his struggle to find his identity as he battled various mythical monsters, the better they understood him.

Throughout our reading of the novel, I also asked students to write in Percy's voice in their Writer's Notebooks and reading guides. They wrote a letter to Percy's father; they described the feeling of seeing Sally in the Underworld in a journal entry; and they drew pictures of Percy's plunge into



Percy Jackson as depicted on the 2010 movie poster for *Percy Jackson and the Olympians: The Lightning Thief* (dir. Chris Columbus, Fox 2000 Pictures).

the Mississippi River. My sixth graders developed a relationship with Percy. Connections were made, and the desire to strengthen that relationship with him was evident as many students chose to read the other books in the *Lightning Thief* series.

I asked the students about Percy at the end of the novel. They liked him, and the most common reason for liking him was because he seemed like a real kid. They saw how he changed from the beginning to the end, and one student even said, "If I could be any book character, I would be Percy Jackson. He's like me but with cooler powers."

Frame the Character

I hate story spoilers, and I always plead with my students not to spoil endings if they read ahead. However, a good teacher does not throw a student into a novel without any hint of what's to come (Gallagher 37–45). Good teachers give students the opportunity to become invested in an assigned novel.

Middle schoolers like choices, and although I do not have the resources for them to choose the required reading, I can give them the opportunity to decide whether or not they like what we are reading. Before my sixth graders have the chance to make a choice, I do everything I can to set them up for a successful experience.

First and foremost, I try to draw them into the text. If I want students to connect to a story's characters, they have to feel comfortable with other major elements, such as plot, setting, and conflict. I can frame the text in many ways, and each novel that I teach during the year has a different introduction. Before we read *The Lightning Thief*, I teach an introductory Greek

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mythology unit that focuses on heroes. I use Internet scavenger hunts for *Where the Red Fern Grows* and *Farewell to Manzanar* to highlight their historical settings. For *Let the Circle Be Unbroken*, we read articles about Jim Crow laws and incorporate a KWL chart.

One of the most challenging characters my students read about comes from Jack London's *White Fang*. It is hard for them to see a connection between their lives and the life of a part dog-part wolf who lives in the Yukon Territory. Some

students would complain to me about the story's bleakness: "Nothing good happens to this dog. It's just one depressing thing after another." They also were disenchanted with London's characterization: "It's just another dog story."

To help forge better personal connections between the students and the text, my teaching partner and I decided to change how we framed the novel. Instead of introducing it by analyzing London's writing style, we used an Anticipation Guide (Readence, Bean, and Baldwin), which helps to focus students on important themes and topics in a work. Using a Senteo response system, which collects survey information from the class and posts it on an interactive whiteboard, we posed a number of philosophical questions related to the major themes and asked students to respond. Many of the questions had *yes* or *no* answers. They included the following:

1. Do you believe it is right to use animals for entertainment?
2. Do you think it is right to punish a wild animal that harms a human?
3. Do you believe we all have a survival instinct?
4. Do you believe there is good in everyone?
5. Do you think some people are born cruel and never can change?
6. Do you think people can change and go against their nature?

The students loved it! It allowed them to sound off on their opinions and see what others in the class thought. Before the story began, the students were thinking of situations that fit with the questions, and when they encountered White Fang's plight and applied his specific predicament to these questions, they formed strong connections between character and theme. White Fang became a new set of eyes through which the students could see and experience the world. *White Fang* was more than just another dog story.

Make Use of Digital Literacies

As my students move from an elementary setting to my sixth-grade language arts classroom, they need extra support. Many of them lack confidence and experience when it comes to reading and interpreting characters, which can make it difficult for them to form a connection. However, these students are very literate when it comes to social networking and technology as described in NCTE's *Adolescent Literacy: A*



Policy Research Brief. For students to create strong connections to characters, I make the most of these digital literacies that students bring to our class.

One activity that has become beloved over the years by students is the Voices of Spokane County blog. Each student is assigned a character from *Let the Circle Be Unbroken* by Mildred D.

Taylor and given access to a Google site. Students take on the role of that character as they read the book and write five different blogs in that character's voice. Some of the topics are chosen for the students while some are the students' choice. At the end of each blogging session, students are required to read at least two other blogs by other characters from the fictitious Spokane County and respond.

Strong relationships are forged among the students and between the students and the characters as a result of this activity. I'll never forget one day last year when I overheard a rather jarring student conversation.

"You called me a low life kid!" one student called out accusingly to another.

I was on the verge of intervening when I heard the response: "Well, Mr. Granger hates the Logans. It's not like he's going to say nice things about them in his blog."

I felt a lot of pride from this exchange. It showed that the blogs not only brought to life for the students the resentment and passion of the characters, but they also allowed me to easily assess the students' knowledge of who's who in the novel and how the characters are connected.


In another activity meant to capitalize on students' digital literacies, I used a metaphor activity involving an iceberg (Gallagher 134–35) and the character White Fang. Using iPads and the ShowMe whiteboard app, students recorded a drawing of an iceberg and an explanation of the visible and not-so-visible characteristics of White Fang. Eventually, they shared their recordings in small groups and compared their insights. Once again, students analyzed characters using two of their favorite things: technology and their peers. I further challenged them to think of other characters

to whom the iceberg metaphor could be applied. I was not surprised when they mentioned Suzella from *Let the Circle Be Unbroken*, and I was thrilled when many groups reported how characters that fit the iceberg metaphor were ones who were the most like real people.

Reading for Character

My local library currently has a display of books about reading, and Anna Quindlen's *How Reading Changed My Life* is featured. This short, 70-page book is a love letter to reading, books, and characters. It's her legacy to reading. I want my classroom to serve as my legacy to reading. Reading has changed my life, and through promoting books and characters and doing whatever I can to establish and strengthen connections to them, I am creating my own love letter to reading.

It is my hope that as my students grow they can turn to the characters they've met in and out of my classroom and look to them for guidance, vicarious experiences, and an escape when things are tough. Quindlen writes, "All of reading is really only finding ways to name ourselves, and, perhaps, to name the others around us so that they will no longer feel like strangers. Crusoe and Friday. Ishmael and Ahab. Daisy and Gatsby. Pip and Estella. Me. Me. Me" (21). As I grew up, I added Nancy and Scarlett to my list of names, and I want my students

and other adolescents to have their own lists, too. It is my hope that by putting characters first and giving my students an opportunity to meet these characters in ways that show them as real people, they will find what Quindlen writes of in her book. I know that students' lists may not include Nancy or Scarlett, but maybe they will include Percy and White Fang. 

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

"Using Microblogging and Social Networking to Explore Characterization and Style" invites students to use technology to trace the development of characters and examine writing style while reading a novel. By assuming the persona of a literary character on a class Ning and sending a set number of tweets (or status updates), students explore changes undertaken by dynamic characters, the effect of plot developments on individual characters, and the nuanced social interactions among characters. <http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/using-microblogging-social-networking-1171.html>