

Reading, Writing and Empathy



“The more they read and write, the more they will learn about themselves and the world.” - Linda Rief

The National Writing Project in NH

Patty Browher
Inter-Lakes Elementary
patty.browher@interlakes.org

Jessica Marrone
Hampstead Middle School
marronej@hampstead.k12.nh.us

“In every bit of honest writing in the world there is a base theme. Try to understand man. If you understand each other you will be kind to each other. Knowing a man well never leads to hate and nearly always leads to love. There are shorter means, many of them. There is writing promoting social change, writing punishing injustice, writing in celebration of heroism, but always that base theme. Try to understand one another.” - John Steinback

What is empathy?

My definition:

A collaborative definition:

Silent Conversation Topic (*Respond to some or all of the questions*): Why is teaching your students empathy important in your classroom or to you in general? What have your experiences been with teaching children to be empathetic?

The Common Core states: “Students will come to understand other perspectives and cultures. Students appreciate that the twenty-first-century classroom and workplace are settings in which people from often widely divergent cultures and who represent diverse experiences and perspectives must learn and work together. Students actively seek to understand other perspectives and cultures through reading and listening, and they are able to communicate effectively with people of varied backgrounds. They evaluate other points of view critically and constructively. Through reading great classic and contemporary works of literature representative of a variety of periods, cultures, and worldviews, students can vicariously inhabit worlds and have experiences much different than their own.

Key Lessons about Teaching Our Students Empathy

- We have the responsibility to bring in a broader perspective on the world and to create a classroom climate where students engage in critique of both the text and their own perspectives.
- We have a huge responsibility to expose our students to quality multicultural literature our students can think critically about.
- In multicultural literature, teachers should be careful not to refer to the characters in the book as “they” and the students and themselves as “us” because it creates a uniform group that doesn’t exist.
- We need to be trained to teach multicultural literature, so that our own ideologies do not get in the way.
- Our students must be exposed to different points of views and perspectives of the characters, and analyze the perspectives of the authors as well.
- We must not be the expert, but rather learning alongside our students, facilitating their learning.
- We must learn to facilitate discussions, particularly when opportunities present themselves through students misconceptions and false beliefs.
- We must follow students’ natural curiosities raised during instruction.
- We must help our students find similarities with the characters in literature they may perceive as different from them.
- We can't just let children enjoy literature. We have got to teach children strategies to read literature deeply, letting it matter to them and change the way they think and view the world.
- Our students must write often in response to literature and about their lives to figure out what they think and understand about the world.
- Our students must have reading that engages, interests and challenges them and write for real reasons and real audiences.

Activities and Strategies to Teach Empathy

(Google the titles for more information!)

Letters About Literature Contest:

Students must write to an author who wrote a book that changed the way they viewed themselves and the world. There are lesson plans to assist you in teaching kids to write effective book reviews and reading response, as well as many samples of student letters of all levels who have won the contest in the past. For more information go to: lettersaboutliterature.org (The deadline for this contest is January 11th, 2013)

Two Voice Poetry

Students can write Two Voice Poetry to compare and contrast themselves to a character in a book.

Joyful Noise: Poems for Two Voices by Paul Fleischman has many examples of Two Voice Poems you can share with you students as models. For more information and examples go to:

<http://www.nwp.org/cs/public/print/resource/2229>

Bio Poems

Line 1: Your characters first name

Line 2: Four words that describe that character

Line 3: Brother or sister of...

Line 4: Love of... (three ideas or people)

Line 5: Who feels... (three ideas)

Line 6: Who needs... (three ideas)

Line 7: Who fears... (three ideas)

Line 8: Who would like to see...

Line 9: Resident of...

Line 10: Character's last name

Character Poem/ Item Poem

Title: Your character's name & the items name

Line 1: State the items name (important to the character)

Line 2: Give a literal description of it.

Line 3: Give figurative description of it

Line 4: Give one adjective for it

Line 5: Give another adjective for it

Line 6: State what the item does for the character

Line 7: Give a final description (adjective then noun)

I AM Poem (as the character)

I am (two special characteristics character has)

I wonder (something character might be curious about)

I hear (a sound from the book character might hear)

I want (a desire the character has)

I am (repeat the first line of the poem)

I pretend (something the character might pretend to be or do)

I feel (an emotion the character the character might feel)

I touch (something the character might touch)

I cry (something that makes the character sad)

I am (repeat the first line of the poem)

I understand (something the character knows)

I say (a direct quote from the book that character says or might say)

I dream (something the character might dream a lot about)

I try (something the character makes an effort to do)

I hope (something the character hopes for)

I am (repeat the first line of the poem)

(*Use historical documents and primary sources whenever possible)

Resources to Teach Empathy

Literature for Children

Hey Little Ant by Phillip Hoose
Farmer Duck by Martin Waddell
Wonder by R. J. Palacio
Out of My Mind by Sharon Draper
Flying Solo by Ralph Fletcher
Rules by Cynthia Lord
Out of my Mind by Sharon Draper
14 Cows for America by Carmen Agra Deedy
A Life Like Mine: How Children Live Around the World by DK Publishing
If the World Were a Village by David J. Smith
If America Were a Village by David J. Smith
This Child, Every Child by David J. Smith
Great Joy by Kate DiCamillo
My Name Is María Isabel by Alma Flor Ada
Esperanza Rising by Pam Muñoz Ryan
Becoming Naomi Leon by Pam Muñoz Ryan
White Socks Only by Evelyn Coleman
Sister Anne's Hands by Marybeth Lorbiecki
Walk Two Moons by Sharon Creech
Bud, Not Buddy by Christopher Paul Curtis
The Watsons Go To Birmingham, 1963 by Christopher Paul Curtis
The Liberation of Gabriel King by K. L. Going
Freedom Summer by Deborah Wiles
The Other Side by Jacqueline Woodson
One for the Murphys by Lynda Mullaly Hunt
Liar and Spy by Rebecca Stead

Professional Literature for Teachers

Lessons that Change Teachers by Nancie Atwell

Black Ants and Buddhists by Mary Cowhey

Teaching for Joy and Justice by Linda Christensen

Reading, Teaching, and Rising Up by Linda Christensen

Notice and Note by Kylene Beers and Robert E. Probst

Process Drama and Multiple Literacies: *Addressing Social, Cultural and Ethical Issues* Edited By Jennifer Jasinski Schneider, Thomas P. Crumpler, and Theresa Rogers

Write for Insight by William Strong

Opening Minds: *Using Language to Change Lives* by Peter Johnston

Choice Words by Peter Johnston

Inside the Readers-Writers Notebook by Linda Rief

Must Read Professional Articles

Bridging the Cultural Gap by Teaching Multicultural Literature
by Yu Ren Dong

As multicultural literature has made its way into the English curriculum, it has challenged teachers' thinking about curriculum and instruction and urged them to expand their teaching repertoire to include a cultural-response approach to literature instruction. This article reports on a group of secondary English teachers' exploration and reflection on their teaching of multicultural literature. The author argues that teachers must increase their own cultural knowledge and develop their sensitivity and teaching skills to promote cross-cultural understanding and use multicultural literature to validate expressions of cultural knowledge, perspectives, and differences.

“Um, They Weren't Thinking About Their Thinking”: Children's Talk About Issues of Oppression by Jeanne Fain

This powerful article highlights the importance of having authentic, meaningful, and engaging discussions in which the teachers and students are learning alongside one another as they tackle tough situations the oppressed characters faced in the book, as well as why the oppressor may have treated others in this way. Her students were able to think critically about humanity and history, as well as think about different points of views and perspectives of both the authors and the characters. By having these critical discussions, they are able to empathize with both the oppressor and the oppressed, so they can create social change.

Complicated Conversations : Exploring Race and Ideology in an Elementary Classroom by Liz Hollingworth

In this article, a case study is done on a fourth grade teacher who decided to use multicultural literature in her classroom. Her intent was to use the literature to help her students to understand about racial stereotypes and prejudices, but often the conversations normalized Whiteness in ways that shut down conversations about racism, oppression and prejudices. Teachers should act as facilitators to help students to come to a better understanding of race, oppression, and prejudice, as it also relates to them in their own life. Bottom line, multicultural literature must be used in the classroom, we mustn't have a color-blind classroom, and teachers need to be trained to teach multicultural literature, so that their own ideologies do not get in the way.

Creating Empathetic Connections to Literature by Leslie Roessing

Taken aback by her eighth grade students' dry-eyed response to *The Diary of Anne Frank*, Roessing finds a way to help students convert the "them" they encounter in multicultural literature into "us." The teacher in this article uses Two Voice Poetry to have her students analyze the similarities and differences between themselves and the diverse characters in their book.

Singer, Judith & Smith, Sally. (2003): The Potential of Multicultural Literature: Changing Understanding of Self and Others, Multicultural Perspectives, 5:2, 17-2

This article supports the view that it is essential for the teacher to bring multicultural literature into the classroom. It is the responsibility of the teacher to bring in a broader perspective on the world, and to create a classroom climate where students engage in critique of both the text and their own perspectives. This article examines how reading and responding to multicultural young adult literature helps teacher education students deepen their understanding of themselves and of different “others.”

Great Websites and Other Resources

<http://www.edutopia.org/how-teach-character-classroom>

- This site includes ideas, such as, using opportunities during any lesson to teach character. When learning about famous people in history, characters in a book ask what life skill did she have or lacked in life?
- Start with recess because that’s what kids really know well; ask how recess went today and what could improve student behavior.
- With the above recess discussion taking place, my idea is to start a Dear Abby style letter writing activity. Maybe write letters then put them in a box then have kids pick a letter out of the box to read and write a response back as advice. I will introduce the lesson by reading a few actual letters that are age appropriate as an example and the Dear Abby response to the letters.

<http://www.virtuetoy.com/ideas.html>

- List of virtues and also click links to character cards.

<http://instillingvalues.com/>

- Teach a value a week – see list of 52 virtues

More Great Websites and Resources

<http://www.operationrespect.org/>

- A great site that includes a free resource book that is a companion to the lyrics to the song “Don’t Laugh At Me” . Note: There are several music video versions of the song/poem “Don’t Laugh At Me” on U Tube and Teacher Tube.

<http://learningtogive.org/>

- A site that offers 1,600 lesson plans for teachers K-12 and service projects for kids.

<http://www.pearsonlongman.com/ae/marketing/sfesl/generaltopics.html#Relationships>

- This site gives examples of writing prompts for writing about empathy.

Prompt: If asked what you value most in life, what would you say? Chances are that good friends would be high on your list. Write about a good friend and tell why you value him or her.

Prompt: All of us have our own ways of making sense of the world. Our beliefs and opinions can seem so right that it's hard to imagine how anyone could disagree with us. Write about a disagreement you've had recently. Tell how it you resolved it.

Prompt: Problems are part of life. Learning to resolve them often takes time and practice. How do you resolve problems that you have with friends? Tell your suggestions for working things out.

Prompt: Whom do you appreciate? How do you express your appreciation of that person?

NCTE Beliefs About Writing that Connect to Our Practice

- People learn to write by writing
- Everyone has the capacity to write, writing can be taught, and teachers can help students become better writers
- Writing has a complex relationship to talk
- Writing is a tool for thinking
- Writing grows out of many different purposes
- Writing and reading are related

*To read more about NCTE beliefs and the implications they have for your teaching, go to: <http://www.ncte.org/positions/statements/writingbeliefs>

