

3 Creating and Adapting Ideas for and from Your Teaching

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Diana outlines what is important to her about teaching ideas and activities. One thing you will notice in this chapter is her emphasis on student interest. Effective teachers know that students who are engaged and care about their work not only are happier in the classroom, but they also learn more. Capitalizing on student interest and knowledge can be one of the most potent strategies we have in teaching. Diana starts with her beliefs and understandings about teaching the language arts and then moves into the world of students.

The field of language arts interpenetrates almost all aspects of the world. It includes reading, writing, talking, and drawing about any issue we want to grapple with and make sense of. Within that broad framework, I can plug in language arts skills to help students become better readers, willing to tackle more complex texts; better writers, whose work makes an impact on others; and better speakers, with the tools and structures to offer their ideas confidently and effectively.

When I think about creating teaching ideas and units, I never restrict myself to what sound like “English-class” subjects. I don’t create units on short stories or poetry, because with those kinds of titles I don’t know how to breathe life into them and transform them into topics I want to explore—or that my students will be interested in.

When I think imaginatively, my mind flies from one thing to another because I don’t feel constrained; I am free to let my mind roam, to figure out how I can best involve students in reading and writing and language and thinking. I’ve never worried much about whether I’m “covering” the content of language arts, because I know how to connect almost every reading and writing and speaking experience to what I am doing. I can see the big picture, how things fit in and together. Thus, I don’t have a narrow view of the language arts, nor do I feel I can teach little pieces of things unless they are in the context of a big question or unit that we—my students and I—are working on.

The Ideas behind the Ideas

I see myself as a pathfinder of sorts. I love to create teaching ideas and assignments because I like to deal with the excitement of possibilities. I love the thought of opening up something, of helping students find ways into material or ideas. As I see it, my job is to help students see the possibilities within an approach, or to see the excitement of that approach. I know that creativity and engagement cannot be forced; it can only be coaxed. So for me teaching isn't about frontal assaults, telling students what they must do and how they must do it. It's about gently uncovering ways for students to find their way into the learning by making connections within themselves. Then they will have places to put new ideas within the framework of their own thinking.

I also believe that my students come to my classroom full of experiences, thoughts, feelings, and ideas. I have to tap into those sources to help them discover what is within them and to help them be willing to go beyond what they already are or what they already know. I do not believe in a deficit model of education—that our job is to fill up those empty heads. I respect my students and know I am enriched by being with them—I too will learn from them. This is reflected in my teaching ideas and assignments. Too often we are asked only to find things outside of ourselves; we are rarely called on to look inward, to find the sources of our originality.

My job, then, is to raise questions within the classroom since questions are the place where the unknown becomes knowable in our lives. We give voice to thoughts; we dig deep inside ourselves to find ways to approach the questions. Of course, the characteristic of a good question is that it has no one answer but instead helps direct us in our quest to find answers.

I constantly ask myself: Is this topic or issue important to think about? Since we are educating both the minds and hearts of students, we want them to immerse themselves in significant ideas, not just get a dollop of this or that subject. What we do in class has to be part of this big picture called life; it can't be about trivia that would be considered unimportant outside the language arts classroom. Take the ideas on heroes (see Chapter 6), for instance. These ideas are not merely exercises in mental gymnastics; they help us look at what is important and what we value through a consideration of what we admire in others.

I also feel that to involve students in our classes, we have to show them that we are excited and interested in the unit of study. If it seems uninspired, boring, or ho-hum to us, think how students will feel. Al-

most anything can be made interesting if we find questions within the topic to which we—not just our students—can connect.

What an Effective Assignment Looks Like

I like assignments that:

- awaken and activate what is within me
- provide lots of possibilities and tap into my imagination
- are fun and interesting and make me want to think about them
- ask me to wake up and use the bits of life and living around me—I have to be reminded to open my eyes, my ears, my senses of smell, taste, and touch so that I can make use of all the ways I have of knowing
- allow new thoughts to flower, bring out the unexpected, help me discover what I think
- have a “nowness” about them; there is a reason for and importance to doing them at this point in time
- push me to know more while validating what I bring to them
- have an element of spontaneity in them; they are not plodding or predictable, leading only to someone else’s answers
- let me create my own shapes and don’t expect me to produce cookie-cutter-like thinking

In sum, I love assignments that place me squarely on the threshold of who I am and what I can become. This kind of assignment begins with me and what I know or perceive and gently pushes me to uncover new ways of seeing. At the end, I have a clearer vision of the question I am pursuing, and through these new thoughts or realizations I learn more about myself.

What an Ineffective Assignment Looks Like

I dislike assignments that:

- put boundaries on my thinking and tell me there is only one way to see or do something
 - give me no choices about either format or content
 - give me a model of perfection that is beyond my reach and makes me freeze up instead of igniting ideas within me (perfect models deaden—they do not inspire)
 - ask me to memorize bits and pieces of subject matter so I can parrot them back on a test; this memorization creates dry pock-
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ets within my mind instead of producing fertile soil in which seedlings of new thought can grow

- assume I am deficient in some way
- assume learning is a step-by-step linear process and that learning does not depend on being embedded in a meaningful context
- have no connection to anything else nor any apparent reason for being required except that they are “good” for me and will benefit me in the future

Any of these characteristics of ineffective assignments will prevent students from achieving their best in your classroom.

Examples of Effective and Ineffective Assignments

One assignment that has always worked well is the yearbook assignment (see Chapter 4), in which students create yearbook pages with cut-out magazine pictures representing characters from a novel they have just read. The students are part of a wonderful creation: they are giving face to the characters they have read about, taking what they know about them from the novel and thinking hard, digging deep to create words and ideas that will help them know these characters better. Students spent one of our most exciting days in class paging through heaps of magazines looking for pictures to capture the vision they held in their heads of the characters in *The Great Gatsby*. The talk was constant and exciting: “Doesn’t this look like Daisy because she has that passive, spoiled look?” “How about this for Jordan—she looks like she isn’t apt to tell the truth.”

Then students had to think of book titles or create one that could be a character’s favorite book. One student thought Jay Gatsby’s favorite book would be Charles Dickens’s *Great Expectations*. Students worked to capture the essence of fictional characters. They did this work to find out what they thought these characters would be like outside the confines of the book. Of course, the actions and descriptions of the characters had to be built from what students knew of them in the novel, and students added to what they knew by exploring the characters in new ways.

What about assignments that don’t work? I had to learn the hard way that assignments that are unsuccessful smack of the do-it-for-practice-until-you-get-it-right mentality. One such assignment asks students to learn to write sentences. The assumption here is that students can learn to do something perfectly outside of any context or meaning and

then transfer this skill to the “real” work. This sounds plausible, but it simply isn’t successful.

Part of the reason this strategy doesn’t work is rooted in learning theory and part in writing theory. Students don’t learn if they don’t see how the skill fits in with what they already know or if they feel there is no reason for them to practice. Can you imagine your feelings if I asked you to write ten examples of declarative sentences before I let you write anything of substance? Also, doesn’t just hearing the assignment make your eyes glaze over? What would make you want to create beautiful, astonishing sentences? Those kinds of sentences are created only within the context of a writing assignment that the writer cares about.

Strategies for Creating Units

I see a unit as “the big picture” that acts as a framework into which the work students will be doing will fit. So, when I create teaching ideas and units, I try to *start with things that fascinate me and interest me*. For example, when I created a unit around what we were like as kindergartners or young children, I was genuinely interested in pursuing this topic, thinking about it, and discovering what I could learn from reflecting on myself as a child. I also knew that my students would find the idea equally fascinating. I knew that new ninth graders would not be able to talk about how awkward it is to begin high school, but that they were far enough away from their kindergarten years to feel safe talking, writing, and reading about them. Likewise, when I put together the unit of short stories about parents (see Chapter 4), I knew students would be interested in thinking about their parents and how they have been treated by them. But I also knew the stories could help us look at our parents more dispassionately. I suspected students would be engaged because almost everyone is still struggling through these issues. I “hooked” students by my series of true and false questions which got them to thinking about, among other things, whether they “owe” their parents anything.

So I start preparing a unit by considering what I might want to know more about, what issues it touches on, and whether students might be interested in those issues. That is why teaching is never boring, cannot ever be boring—it is a constant process of discovery. I get to learn and think and create along with my students. Through language arts, we study such things as our childhoods, what being a teen is like today, the nature of violence, what motivates people, what respect is and how to get it.

I always *create a reason or a context* in which to read the stories or do the writing or the speaking. We never read just to get through a story but to discover things, such as that “friends” may urge us to make a bad decision (as in Walter Dean Myers’s *Monster*), or to talk about things, such as what it’s like to be alone. I am not a plodder, working through an anthology having students answer the questions at the end and then moving on. Our purpose is not to answer chapter questions; our purpose is to answer life’s questions. Students need to know that they are reading or writing stories for a reason.

I can’t think of anything deadlier than announcing, “We’re going to have a short story unit now.” Somehow, we have to create excitement, find the questions students want to explore and answer. So what I do when I use some of the wonderful stories in an anthology is to *group them in meaningful ways and frame them in a way that interests students*. That is how I selected the stories in my American literature anthology for the unit I created on parents. I found stories in which parents were central, and those were the stories we read as a unit (see Chapter 4).

Teachers cannot be one-dimensional. We can’t read a story with a single purpose in mind. Instead, we have to encourage responses from students and build on those responses. When I was working with the stories in the parents unit, other issues and ideas of course came up. This was completely acceptable: we should not be in the business of “allowing” discussion of a story only in the ways we have mapped out. Since the point of literature is to make an impact, we have to celebrate and encourage that impact by listening to other issues and ideas that students raise.

I also constantly think about how to *make connections*. How can this idea connect to students’ lives? Will it generate issues or topics that will excite them or that they will want to grapple with? How can this idea connect to other genres? Will we be able to find poems, nonfiction, films, TV shows, children’s literature, tall tales, short stories, and novels that will relate? Will we be able to connect this unit to the other literature we have already talked about or to stories students have read in literature circles? How can it connect to the larger world? Are the issues in the unit important ones that humans think about and wonder about?

Creating Options in Assignments

Once I have created the idea for the unit—the umbrella under which our work will be conducted—I think of specific assignments and projects

that can help students accomplish the unit goals. When I create projects and assignments, I always work to provide options. There is nothing worse than being given a topic to write on that makes your mind go blank. I generate options by first thinking about what I or my students might want to know more about. I try to think of questions that go to the heart of human existence and living, questions that are not made-up or trivial. Essentially, no matter what grade I teach, I always try to tap into the heart of what is important to us as human beings, and I have been surprised by the commonalities of concerns we share throughout our lives.

When I create these options, I usually simply start with whatever occurs to me; then I use the following categories to extend my thinking as I try to generate more connections:

Can I change a point of view? Would students think it interesting to write as if they were another character and tell the world what he or she thought?

Can I bring someone else in? Can I think of someone who might have an interesting point of view on the characters or events? For *Maniac Magee*, I brought a social worker into the classroom so students could think about how someone from the outside with authority would look at the McNab house.

Can I encourage students to think about characters in new ways? When I created the hero unit (see Chapter 6), the seed came from reading about the idea of a hero, getting excited about the possibilities, and then realizing that the idea of heroes could be integrated into much of the discussion about literature we read by asking students who a character's hero might be. This pushes students to analyze what they already know about a character and to extend that knowledge by thinking about the kind of heroes that would appeal to that character.

Can I encourage students to extend what is in the story? Can students add to what they know about the characters by putting the characters in new situations and seeing how they would act, such as having them write about a character appearing at our school? Or can they develop or explain something that was only alluded to in the story, such as creating the scenes in *Maniac Magee* when Maniac first went to live with his aunt and uncle?

Can I identify new formats in which students can respond? I decided to use the format of answering machine messages to give students opportunities to show what they know or can infer about characters. Students could use the language and expressions of the characters to create answering machine messages that reflected the characters' attitudes and personalities. Other formats include character monologues for characters who haven't had a chance

to say what is really on their minds, or a college application for a character in a novel.

Can I identify issues in stories that connect to the students' lives?

Sometimes an idea is so powerful that students need to respond to it. Oftentimes, because the issues mean so much to students they are eager to explore them. For instance, when my students wrote in response to *Bud, Not Buddy* by Christopher Paul Curtis, they wrote with real feeling about such things as the racism they have witnessed or been subjected to, or the death of a loved one. Literature is full of rich issues that connect to the lives of our students.

Getting Ideas for Units and Making the Unit Blossom

First and foremost, I watch what students respond to and try to build on that response. For example, because of an offhand comment by a ninth grader indicating that he wouldn't date girls who didn't have breasts, I developed a unit around body image. The focus of the inquiry was on the values the students held about physical appearance.

I tried to think of ways to make visible the beliefs that undergird our thinking about appearances. We began by creating collages made from magazine pictures that we thought exemplified what girls "should" look like and what boys "should" look like. Each student worked on a collage for his or her gender. Then students made another collage of photographs of people they love, both male and female.

We discussed the first collages in terms of the media-generated standards of perfection for both males and females. We contrasted the first collages with the collages of people we loved, noting that appearance has very little to do with who we love. From there, we wrote and read stories that dealt with appearance and characters who felt they should change their appearance for someone else (even the last scenes of the movie *Grease* can be used). Students also hunted for poems in books I brought to class that spoke to this issue. These activities elicited strong feelings, most students believing they should be accepted the way they are.

I also create units around the strengths and knowledge of the students I teach. I notice what they like, what they're worried about, what concerns them. That's why I created a unit around being a teen in the 1990s. We read fiction, nonfiction, and poetry, and looked at these works in terms of our own experiences. Did this story seem to portray teen life accurately? How are our lives different? What isn't portrayed in the literature? Students were the experts, bringing knowledge of their lives to evaluate these stories.

Another way I get ideas for units is to go to the library and look mainly at children's books, both fiction and nonfiction. When I see books, I see possibilities. Picking up Jacob Lawrence's *The Great Migration*, I think about where our families came from, why they came here, and what drove them away (such as the Jim Crow laws in the South or lack of work), or about what draws us to places, such as geography or climate. I consider stories of moving I could ask students to write—what the hard parts or the joyous parts of moving were. The song "Moving Right Along" pops into my head. I wonder if I could use that to explore different takes on change and moving along. Is getting somewhere new half the fun? Then I wonder what stories, picture books, poems, nonfiction, novels, or movies I can find. And so I begin.

Or I might discover a book such as *Richard Wright and the Library Card* by William Miller or *Kids Still Having Kids* by Janet Bode. I brainstorm ways in which the subjects might interest or involve my students. Discrimination (a theme in the Richard Wright book) because of race, age, or gender would probably result in lots of student stories. We could find people in the community to talk about racial discrimination in our city. I know the woman who was the first black teacher hired in our school district in the 1950s. Potential projects jump into my mind—kids doing pamphlets or ad campaigns or public service campaigns about discrimination. What rights do *they* have as teens? What should they do when they're followed by security guards at the mall?

I create units around the material in the textbook. In my American Literature classes, I frame my units around questions students can get involved with. When we read Thoreau, I wanted to move students to their own frames of reference, so I framed the unit around the question: Can we learn about ourselves and the world through nature? Before we started the unit, students had to spend ten minutes alone under the stars and then write a reflection on the experience. We read *Walden* and the writings of Gary Paulsen and worked to articulate the impact that nature could have on us.

These larger questions give me points of entry into the topic. I ask myself which poems, short stories, novels, nonfiction, or films I can use. I think about how I might be able to work music into the unit. I try to bring things from student life—such as music—into the classroom as another lens through which to view our work. I might have students bring in songs or instrumental pieces they think Thoreau would like. We could play a piece, jot down the impact it made on us, and then talk about how Thoreau might react.

When I think about writing and project ideas, I start with the ones that interest me. What would I love to write about in response to a piece of writing or a unit? What would I learn from this experience? What would open up possibilities and not make me feel hemmed in? I ask myself how I can get kids fascinated and engaged with the question or the topic, how I can get them inside the learning and become more than passive bystanders. Can I start with a survey to pique their interest, create questions they can write or talk about, ask them what they know about something?

Integrating Ideas from This Book into Your Own Teaching

Each of us has a different teaching style, different way of approaching things, different way of being with students. But no matter how your approach differs from mine, if you understand the theory or philosophy at the heart of my teaching, then pieces of these ideas and approaches can be worked into whatever you are doing.

You can start by creating new frames or new ways to look at the material you are using. For instance, if you are using Ben Franklin's *Autobiography* in your American Literature textbook, instead of asking what the piece is about and what we learn about the times in which Franklin lived, come up with a new question or new way to think about this work. Consider what Ben Franklin thought he needed to change about himself. Are these things we are concerned about today? Or have students explore what they think Franklin would be writing about now if he were alive. Or have students draw up resolutions they would like to live by and compare them to Franklin's. What can they glean from setting their piece of writing next to Franklin's? Have values changed?

Or if students are reading "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" by Cotton Mather, they could think about which of his ideas still resonate today. They can discuss how effective Mather's fire-and-brimstone delivery would be today and why it would or would not be used. They can even talk about why humans have such differing views of what God is like. Some see God as a harsh, judgmental, ready-to-dump-us-into-hellfire Being, while others conceive of God as an all-loving, accepting Being. These kinds of questions work to create approaches to literature that will make it alive and current for students.

You also need to consider how to begin formulating your questions. Paying attention only to form and how and why something is written the way it is can be deadly. Consider instead the issues at the

heart of literature. Think about what you would like to talk about or explore after the class has read a particular work of literature.

To begin, contemplate the piece of writing outside of the traditional framework in which you are used to thinking about it. Don't start with plot, character, setting, theme, point of view, or style. Trying to limit your thinking to these categories only blocks your thinking. Don't dwell on what you think you *should* be doing; dwell on what sounds interesting to you.

Another way these ideas can be worked into the framework of what you already do in class is to look at what you are asking students to do. Are you giving them options? Are you validating the worth of their contributions in class? Or do you assume that the most important talk in a class is your talk, teacher talk? Using students' ideas to build on what they bring to class in the way of knowledge and experience is one cornerstone of good teaching (see Chapter 5 on using students' ideas). Inviting and building on student talk is one way students grapple with the questions and content they are dealing with. Allowing only teacher talk deadens a class and gives students the message that there is only one way of knowing, only one way to view things. Further, it gives students the wrong idea—that language arts is not about being expansive and opening up the world but is instead a tightly prescribed body of content that students should master and be able to prove mastery of.

Providing writing and project options is another way to tell students that you value difference in their writing and that they are not writing only for you. Before they are willing to take risks in their work and try out new formats or genres, students need to feel safe from emotional ridicule, accepted by the teacher and their peers, and unafraid of not measuring up to harsh standards.

You might wonder how to begin creating options. After you read a piece of writing, several themes or issues usually surface quickly. Take one of those themes and issues, such as friendship or being accepted or being connected to nature, and structure options that allow students to apply that theme to their own lives. Do they have their own story of friendship? Has the same kind of incident as that described in the story ever happened to them?

Once I exhaust the possibilities of how I can relate the options to the lives of my students, I move on to other areas. What opportunities can I create for students to interact with the characters and with the characters' thinking? Can they find poems that the character would like? Can they write from the point of view of the character? Can they compose a letter from one character to another?

Other options can be created by connecting the literature to life. Do students agree with the beliefs demonstrated by a character? Can they dramatize issues in the novel or explore issues such as living with stepparents, perhaps in a talk show format? Also, when I create options I include some that push students to think critically. They can brainstorm the themes they believe were present in the story and write about which ones were most important; they can look at gender and race within the story by writing about which roles could most easily be played by a character of another race or gender, and why.

Other options give students the opportunity to create in response to the text. They might draw images or make a collage that captures the essence of the novel, or they might write a short story or create poems on the same theme. (Before I finish creating options, I also go over all the formats or “ways into literature” and/or my list of fifty alternatives to the book report to see if these pieces give me any more ideas. For specifics, see Chapter 4.)

Another way you can use these ideas to add to your own teaching is to use what students generate in class. Do you ask them to respond in writing with their own opinions or their own understandings about something? If so, then use their responses. This is a wonderful way to encourage student understanding and to build on what students bring to the class in the way of information and experience.

One simple way to get started using student work is to have students “inkshed,” i.e., write on each others’ papers with responselike comments. As an illustration, if all the students in your class are writing about their reading autobiography, put them in groups and have them pass the papers around, responding only to the content. They might say such things as “Me too!,” or “How awful!,” or “I had a teacher just like that.” When students finish reading all four or five papers, they discuss the similarities and differences in their early reading experiences and work to draw conclusions. Each group then tells the whole group what they have learned, and often a whole class discussion will be sparked. Students can also generate themes or motifs from novels, create lists of questions for characters, and come up with myriad other responses on which to build the work of the class (see Chapter 6).

Conclusion

Student interest drives student learning. Keeping in mind that our major goal is to answer life’s questions, analyze what you do in class in this light. We all have the ability to extend invitations to learning that

will make our students imagine, wonder, and crave more learning. With some thought and preparation, with some attention to our students and their needs, we can all create and implement innovative, exciting teaching ideas.

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