Following Characters into Meaning

ENVISIONMENT, PREDICTION, AND INference

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firsthand
Dedicated to Teachers
Dedicated to Melanie Brown, with thanks for unending support and generosity.
FOLLOWING CHARACTERS INTO MEANING

VOLUME 1: Envisionment, Prediction, and Inference

PART ONE WALKING IN A CHARACTER’S SHOES

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“If we read well, we become the character in a book. We read the words and then poof! We are one of the characters in the mental movie we’re making. Poof! I’m Willy, bundled up on that sled, snow flying into my eyes, my heart racing, urging Searchlight on.”

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SESSION XI  Attending to Objects that Reveal Characters  58
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SESSION XII  Seeing Characters Through the Eyes of Others  70
“When readers want to think deeply about a character, we examine the ways that people around the character treat the character, looking especially for patterns of behavior. We not only notice how other people, other characters, treat and view the main character; we also notice what others call the character and the voice and body language people assume when talking to the character.”

SESSION XIII  Reaching for Exactly True Words  82
“Readers sharpen our ideas about characters by using precise language to describe them and their actions. (Author: please expand)"
It is essential that stories ignite a vital sort of imagination, one that allows readers to live inside the world of the story, to identify with the characters, seeing and sensing situations from inside the characters’ minds. This, the first portion of the unit, highlights personal response, envisionment, and empathy to strengthen that connection between readers and characters. In this volume, you’ll also learn how to use informal assessment to help you clarify several reading skill progressions—learning what predicting can look like in early stages and then in advanced stages, for example—so that you can lay out learning pathways for readers, helping them to develop more powerful reading skills.

The first portion of this unit, contained in Volume I, helps children approach their study of character aesthetically (walking in the shoes of characters, seeing through the characters’ eyes, empathizing, and predicting), while the second volume shifts focus so that now we help readers approach texts efferently (pulling back to develop a bird’s-eye view of a text, gleaning facts and insights about characters that they then carry away from the text, synthesizing this information into evidence-based theories and talking about these theories with others). Our goal by the end of the unit is for readers to be able to shift between these stances—with aesthetic reading enriching the efferent reading and vice versa—blending together the advantages of being lost in the text with the advantages of being analytical about it.

Some Highlighted Skills
Volume 1: empathizing, envisioning, predicting, building engagement
Volume 2: inferring, developing theories about characters, synthesizing

Overview of the Unit

It is impossible to read a novel well and not think and care about the characters, making a unit of study on character feel somewhat inevitable. The unit is also easier to provision than some, because children can grow ideas about characters when reading any fiction book at all, so you do not need a specialized library.

At the start of any unit, it is important to clarify the reading goals for the unit. Children will hear that this is a unit on “characters,” and that topic will be so concrete and clear to them that they’ll be ready to get started, no question. You, on the other hand, will probably want to give the focus of the unit a bit of thought because although characters are crucial in any story, there is no reading skill called “characters.” The children will think this is simply a unit on characters, but you will know that this is a unit on a set of skills that you’ll bring forth as children read fiction, thinking and caring about characters. And those skills can be chosen by you, the teacher.
The Goals and Plan for Volume 1: Teach in Ways that Support Lost-in-the-Book Reading

Supporting Students’ Reading Volume
Although your teaching may emphasize envisionment and prediction during the first portion of the unit and close reading, inference, and growing theories during the second portion of the unit, throughout the whole unit children will be engaged in similar work: reading, reading, and reading more fiction books. If they read books that are levels K, L, or M, they’ll read at least five of these a week. If they are reading books that are levels U, V, or above, they’ll read more like one a week. If they are reading something in between, their reading volume will also be something in between. Either way, they’ll be reading a lot—and this matters more than anything else I will say in this write-up!

Continuing Partner Work
Meanwhile, it also matters that your children meet with a partner for five minutes or so at the end of every day’s reading workshop. Depending on the availability of books in your classroom library, partners can be reading the same books or books from the same series or just different books they swap. If partners have a character in common, the conversation can focus on the shared characters. If you don’t have enough series books in your classroom for partners to read within the same series, you’ll need to do more work teaching each partner to listen carefully to follow the development of characters across their partners’ texts.

Supporting the Lost-in-a-Book Feeling with an Absorbing Read-Aloud
During the first portion of the unit, then, you’ll teach toward that lost-in-a-book feeling that comes when one identifies with the protagonist in a good story. The easiest way to guide children into this lost-in-a-book feeling of being caught up in the story is to read aloud an absorbing chapter book, helping children imagine the world of the story and identify with the main character. During the preceding unit, you will have demonstrated and supported that lost-in-the-book work by encouraging empathy with characters during the read-aloud, and now you’ll continue and extend this work, again reading aloud an enthralling text. Again you’ll pause in the midst of read-aloud to say, “I can see it, can’t you?” and then paint a picture that is drawn from earlier information in the text, from identifications with characters, and from your own life experiences, too. Another time you might look up from the text and say, “I’m trying to imagine in my mind what this looks like. I’ve never been to this school, but I’m kind of picturing it is like our school—red brick, three stories tall—I’ll read on and see.” As you read on in the story about the school, it’s likely that new information in the text will lead you to revise your initial mental pictures. “Oh, now I realize it’s a white clapboard schoolhouse! And I’m getting the idea it’s much smaller than our school, because….” You’ll definitely want to point out explicitly the ways in which close reading informs your mental pictures, helping you continually revise those pictures in light of new information.

The point, of course, is not only to help readers picture the text, almost as if it was the film of a movie being run through the projector of the reader’s own mind, but also to help readers read with a sense of identification. As you read aloud, then, you’ll sometimes say, “How do you think he’s feeling right now? Turn and talk.” Or “I’m worried about him. Aren’t you? Turn and tell your partner about your worries.” Or you may say, “Show me on your faces what Rob is feeling now,” or, a bit later, “Use your body to show me what’s happening to Rob now. Things are changing, aren’t they!”

Supporting the Lost-in-a-Book Feeling in Independent Reading: Mental Pictures and Dramatization
Of course, the goal is not only for children to envision and lose themselves in the books that you read aloud. The goal is also for children to do this for themselves when they read. You’ll want to teach children to envision through every means possible. During independent reading and the follow-up partnership times, you’ll probably encourage children to talk about their mental pictures. What do the places in the book look like? What has the reader seen before that can help him or her picture the character, the character’s home, or the locale in which the book is situated? You might encourage a reader to quickly sketch a character or a setting as he or she reads, and then in his or her partnership conversation, to talk through the reasons for this particular image. “What’s going on around the character?” you could prompt. “Who else is there? What’s the scene like?” You’ll tell readers if they’re not sure what a scene entails, this is how reading goes. The reader’s job is to draw on all we have read and then guess—imagining as best we are able.

When children meet in partnerships, you’ll suggest that sometimes readers return to passages that matter in a text, rereading those and almost acting them out as we do this. You might say to two children who are reading Because of Winn Dixie, “Sometimes it helps to actually try to act out a little bit of what we are reading. Why don’t you try it? Why doesn’t one of you pretend you are Opal. Tell
your father why you need this dog. And the other one of you—your dad. You are looking at that stray dog. What are you thinking? Say your thoughts aloud.” Of course, you have an array of ways to nudge children to immerse themselves in whatever they are reading. With that same partnership, you could alternatively have said, “Your right finger puppet is Opal. Opal, tell your father (he’s your left finger-puppet) why you need to adopt this dog! And father (you could hold up your left hand to indicate that finger-puppet), get ready to talk back to your daughter.” Alternatively, you could suggest a child try little bits of fast-writing. “Sometimes it helps to use writing to get us pretending we are the characters in a story we are reading. Try it, for just a second. Pretend you are Opal. You are standing outside that trailer, getting ready to talk to your father. Winn Dixie is right beside you. What are you thinking right now? Jot your thoughts.”

It is essential in reading imaginative literature, as fiction is called, that stories ignite a vital sort of imagination, one that allows readers to piece together and live inside the world of the story.

**Using Informal Assessments to Inform Our Teaching of Prediction**

This summary of the unit has emphasized the skill of envisionment, but you’ll want to teach prediction with equal gusto. You’ll learn how to use informal assessment to help you clarify in your own mind what it is that skilled predictors do so that you can lay out a learning pathway for readers, helping them to progress from where they are as predictors to where they can go next. This work will be informed by your knowledge of the level of text difficulty at which a reader reads. Children who are reading texts at level K/L/M can predict by relying on knowledge of simple, straightforward story structure. A character has a problem and tries, tries, tries to resolve that problem. Readers who are working with texts at level U/V/W will need to do quite different work as they predict, thinking, “How might all the subplots come together into something cohesive at the end? Which characters that seemed minor or subplots that seemed tangential at first might return to bring this story toward its conclusion?”
The Goals and Plan for Volume 2: Growing Theories About Characters

During the second bend in the road of this unit, you’ll shift your emphasis and this time teach readers to read closely, inferring to grow theories about the character, and then reading with those theories in hand, altering them according to incoming information.

Learning About Characters by Noticing Details; Using Details to Infer

We often launch this work by teaching children that in life as well as in books, we watch how people act, noticing especially how they respond to events. From this we formulate tentative theories about them. You might say something like, “I noticed the way you all pulled together the other day when Jeremy was hurt. I saw Randalio making a band-aid out of a paper towel, and from his actions I got the idea that he is quick-thinking and resourceful. And I watched the way Leo kept out of everyone’s way and then found quiet ways to help, and I thought, ‘That’s just the way Leo acts during morning jobs, too.’ I saw a pattern! So I thought, ‘This gives me the idea that Leo is observant, and that his quietness helps him be especially thoughtful.’” Then you could debrief by saying something like, “Do you see how I made theories about Leo and Randalio based on their actions? Readers do that too.” You can tell children that just as we grow theories about people around us, we can also grow theories about characters in books.

For me it is important to emphasize that readers pay attention not only to what a character does but also to how the character does these things. Does the text give any clues about the character’s gestures? About the way a character walks or sits or closes the door? If the text says that a character slumps in the chair, then the reader needs to ask, “Why does she sit like that? Is she tired? Bored? What’s going on?” Readers also pay attention to the way characters talk: the words they choose, their tone of voice, the emotional cues the author adds with dialogue. All of these give hints about what kind of people live in the world of a story. Sometimes the author offers windows into a character’s mind: passages of thinking or an explanation of a character’s motives.

The techniques sound easy to teach, but children often struggle trying to do this work. As I watch their struggles, I invent teaching in response to what they show me. For example, many children need to be taught that readers glean information about a character not only from passages pertaining directly to that character but also from many other passages—those telling about the character’s home, for example, or the character’s family. “Let’s read this story together and think, ‘Which part tells me something about Robert,’” I might say, and then proceed to show that passages describing Robert’s home provide windows into his character.

Reaching for Rich, Precise, Truthful Words

Children also need to be taught that the story will tell specifics, and that readers can infer generalizations. If the story says that Robert started his essay five times, each time crumpling his discarded lead into a wad, then the author is expecting that the reader will supply the generalizations that name the sort of person this character seems to be. The reader won’t find those words in the text but must instead bring those words to the text. Many children will reach first for generic terms: A character is nice, mean, or good. I find it helps to create a literary word chart so that children realize that a nice character might be generous or encouraging or loyal or patient. A mean character might be intolerant or snide or jealous or even malicious. I sometimes suggest kids rate the synonyms for nice along a gradient of niceness for children to begin to grasp the nuances of each word. A child who has marked passages in a story that reveal the character’s traits can profit from being invited to reach for the precisely true word that captures the character’s personality.

Seeking Characters’ Complexity and Evolution

Of course, once a child has read attending to specifics in the story and using those specifics to help spark insights about the character, that child will need to be taught that characters are complicated; they are not just one way. Then too, characters change. Either way, a reader will need to read on in the text, thinking, “Do these new sections of the text confirm or challenge my ideas about the character?”

When I approach a unit intending to teach readers to grow ideas about characters, I know that as part of this I will teach children to think between several related sections of a text—say, a passage at the start, one at the middle, and one at the end—to talk and think very specifically about a character’s evolution across the story line. Children tend to rely on sweeping generalizations when talking about the ways a character changes or the lessons a character learns, and our goal is to teach children to grow grounded, accountable, and especially, precise ideas.

As part of this, it is important to teach readers to use their knowledge of how stories tend to go to remind them of what’s worth noticing in a story and to inform
their thinking about character change. In literature, stories are often built around a central structure in which a main character faces challenges, some explicit and some more nebulous. The character draws on what’s inside himself or herself to meet these challenges and often changes in the process, developing new inner resources. Often not only the main character changes in this process, but other characters change as well. This way, readers come to realize that events in stories are consequential; the choices made by one character affect others, and single events often have a significant impact on other events.

**Overcoming the Particular Challenges in Each Band of Text Difficulty**

In helping young readers to grow ideas about characters, I am informed by my understanding of bands of text difficulty. I know, for example, that readers who are working with K/L/M texts will probably find that those texts feature one or two main characters, each of whom is characterized by a couple of dominant character traits, and those will usually be very much related to the story line. Cherry Sue is overly friendly and generous, and the story line is that Poppleton eventually decides he’s had enough of her generosity and he wants a bit of space from her. It will not require a lot of inference for readers of these texts to deduce what their characters are like as people. Their characters won’t tend to change, either, although their feelings will. Meanwhile, once readers are reading texts in the N/Q band of text difficulty, characters will become more ambivalent. They’ll feel one thing and something contrary to that as well. Readers will often find that the text comes right out and tells them about this emotional complexity. At this band of text difficulty, it is common for a character to change at the end of the story.

**Using Post-Its and Conversation Prompts to Build Theories and Inform Conversations About Characters**

When I teach children to think about the protagonist’s traits, motivations, problems (or struggles), lessons, and/or changes, I tend to suggest children keep Post-its (and perhaps “theory charts”) as they read, and I suggest they meet for five minutes with a partner at the end of every reading workshop to “talk off their Post-its.”

If children are accustomed to working with “boxes and bullets” (see the essay unit in *Units of Study for Teaching Writing*), I help them jot main ideas in a boxes-and-bullets form as they prepare for partner conversations. Either way, once they meet with a partner, I teach readers that one child can get the conversation started by sharing something provocative and central to the text, and then the partner can listen and extend the remark, perhaps using conversation prompts such as these:

- “What in the text makes you say that?”
- “I thought that too, because…”
- “Another example of that is…”
- “I thought something different because…”
- “I agree because…”
- “Wait. I’m confused. Are you saying…”
- “Have you found the same thing with the character in your story?”
- “Can you say more about that?”
- “Can you show me the part in the story where you got that idea?”

I encourage partners to “talk long” about an idea because actually what they are doing as they extend their conversations is learning to think in some depth.

**Growing Complex Theories: Revising Our Thinking as We Go**

As this unit progresses, there’ll come a time when I teach children to look over their Post-its to develop bigger theories about their characters. One way children or partners might do this is to take their Post-its out of their books and sort them into piles that seem to go together. They might sort them into piles that are about one particular character or another. Children can delve into a stack of Post-its (a cluster of related ideas) looking for contrasts and patterns. They can try to develop a new idea out of those Post-its. (We tend to call these bigger ideas theories.) Once children have developed a couple of theories, they can revisit earlier parts of the text in light of their theories. They can also read forward, gathering more evidence to support their theories, making individual theory charts.

Whenever we teach children anything, it is important to have in mind ways to ratchet up the level of what they do. We need to know what it means to do this work fairly well, better, and really well so that we can move youngsters along a trajectory of development. Children, too, need to be part of the conversation about what it means to grow theories about characters really well. I sometimes ask them to do something simple such as starring the Post-its or entries that they thought did an especially good job of carrying ideas, and then I ask them to articulate what it was about this particular Post-it or entry that made it work, and then
use it as a mentor Post-it, a mentor entry. Then the children can continue to read, this time with the goal of producing equally thoughtful responses to reading.

Once children have developed a theory or multiple theories, teach them to read on, expecting that their theories will become more complex (which generally means longer, with qualifiers added) or that they will change. It’s crucial to teach children to revise their initial ideas in light of new information. A child might start off with a theory that “Gilly is mean,” and then learn first to open up the word mean by using more specific ways to talk and think about Gilly. Then the reader might read on, focusing on more parts of the book and thinking about how those parts fit or don’t fit with the theory. Such a child could end up thinking not, “Gilly is mean,” but “Gilly hurts others so they don’t get close to her and don’t matter to her, and so that they, like her mother, don’t hurt her.”

**Sustaining Previous Work as You Continue to Teach**

Of course, as we rally children to do new work within this unit, it is also important to remind them to continue doing all they have already been taught. That is, our teaching must be cumulative. Early in this new unit, I’ll shine a spotlight on something I especially emphasized during last month’s unit, and I’ll act absolutely baffled if any child in the room is not carrying all that I taught last month. For example, I will certainly have emphasized keeping daily logs during Unit 1. I can’t forget those logs now! And of course, I will want to make sure that this unit does not overwhelm children’s reading, so I will continue to emphasize that children need to actually read, eyes on print, for at least forty minutes each day in school and for close to that same amount of time at home.