Tips for the Classroom
In Their Own Words: Making Connections through Character Quotes

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In an effort to connect students with the community through reading, faculty at Northern Michigan University participated in a common read program called "One Book, One Community" by using a chosen text with their first-year composition students. Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* was chosen. Faculty had concerns that the graphic nature of the text and its basis in the Vietnam War might keep some students from connecting to the characters or constructing meaning. To assist students, faculty incorporated the reading strategy "Character Quotes" into their instruction and found that the strategy not only activated students' background knowledge, but also increased their reading focus and comprehension. Most importantly, the strategy encouraged students to make significant connections to the text and develop deeper understandings of the characters' experiences. This article describes how to use this effective and versatile strategy to enhance students' reading skills in the composition classroom.

At Northern Michigan University (NMU), faculty participate in a county-wide, common-read program called "One Book, One Community." This program was established to encourage students and community members to connect not only to literature, but also to one another. For its fifth year, the selection committee chose Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* (1990) so readers could better understand the situations that friends and family face in the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts.

The use of O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* was a particularly appropriate and timely choice for members of the university and the community because the university boasts a vibrant Military Science Department and Reserve Officers' Training Corp (ROTC) program. NMU also enrolls over 270 student-veterans and deployed soldiers (J. Teichmann, personal communication) in two- and four-year programs. In addition, the communities surrounding the university are home to current as well as former military members and their families from the regularly deployed 107th Engineer Battalion of Michigan Army National Guard and the former K.I. Sawyer Air Force Base. Because of the long-standing tradition of armed forces involvement in the area, many university and community members have served or have loved ones currently serving in Iraq and Afghanistan. Thus, they have special interest in military-related topics such as O'Brien's book and can relate more fully to the soldiers' experiences, historically and currently, on a deeper level.

Though the subject matter of O'Brien's fictional work about the Vietnam War remains compelling and timely, faculty anticipated that some students might have difficulty connecting to the experiences of the characters or have challenges constructing meaning from the text. Because O'Brien's book was required for all first-year composition students,

faculty wanted a literacy strategy that would not only activate students' background knowledge but also improve their reading focus and comprehension. "Character Quotes" (Buehl, 2009), an engaging prereading strategy, met the needs of faculty and students and was particularly useful in activating students' prior knowledge and anticipatory skills.

Support for Prereading Strategies

The importance of prereading has deep roots in reading pedagogy. According to Rosenblatt (1960), "the quality of our literary experience depends not only on the text, on what the author offers, but also on the relevance of past experiences and present interests that the reader brings to it" (p. 305). Further, she felt it was crucial that students draw strong connections to a text even before they begin to read because these linkages allow students to deal with more complex and complicated works (p. 309).

Snyder (2009) concurs that "good readers with background knowledge actively make inferences between the textbase they have constructed and information stored in their long term memory" (p. 23). Because prereading is the stage that students most often overlook, instructors should employ a scaffolded strategy that allows students to make connections to the text on multiple levels, especially for their struggling or reluctant readers (Harvey & Goudvis, 2007, pp. 100-104). By showing students that reading is an active process, "deep comprehension and learning occurs. When readers process text at this level, they are able to use and build on the knowledge by using other thinking processes such as abstraction, generalization, and application" (Snyder, 2009, pp. 23-24). Therefore, the task falls to the reading instructor to facilitate students' activation of their background knowledge prior to reading so they can fully comprehend the text at hand.

"Character Quotes" Explained

"Character Quotes" introduces students to text via excerpted quotes before approaching the text as a whole. Using the language of the text the "Character Quotes" strategy allows students to examine characters, authors, or personages by making generalizations based on instructor-selected quotes from the text. Students then create a potential profile of that character or person using inferences made based on their quotes. Thus, readers are able to predict important aspects of a character's personality before they are introduced to the full text. The "Character Quotes" strategy demonstrated below also serves as a way to guide students' comprehension and help students remain actively engaged while they read. By creating a profile, students can synthesize the traits they have identified into a preliminary sketch of the character; in addition, they can predict major themes or conflicts that may arise in the text.

Getting Started

The initial step in utilizing "Character Quotes" is deciding on what text and which excerpts are most appropriate for students. The following explanation of this strategy features a quotation from Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried.*

For the "Character Quotes" strategy, it is appropriate to create groups of two to four students and to use a short, meaningful passage from the novel for every two groups; for example, for a class of 24 students divided into six groups of four, it would be necessary to have three passages. Students preview the selected passages to identify several quotes that reveal different features of the chosen characters' personalities. Then the instructor selects quotes that allow the students to create a variety of descriptions that contribute to revealing who these individuals might be. After selecting the quotes, instructors should place each on a separate piece of paper, leaving empty spaces or a blank bulleted list for students to write their ideas.

The example in Figure 1 uses an excerpt taken from O'Brien's (1998) "The Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong," a chapter in *The Things They Carried* that focuses on a female U.S. civilian who becomes captivated with Vietnam (this is information students may not know at the time of the activity) (p. 111).

Classroom Implementation

Once the quotations are prepared, instructors may begin classroom implementation. Students should work in

Figure 1

"Sometimes I want to *eat* this place. Vietnam. I want to swallow the whole country – the dirt, the death – I just want to eat it and have it there inside me. That's how I feel. It's like…this appetite. I get scared sometimes – lots of times – but it's not bad. You know? I feel close to myself."

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cooperative groups, and each group should have a different quote to reflect on. After reading the quote, each group should create a list of as many words or traits as possible, describing their impressions of the character based on their quote. For example, the group working with the quote shown above might include the following in its list: *confident, calm, immersed, engrossed, fascinated, consumed by the war, secure, become self-aware, assertive,* or *gone wild.* Once each group has created its list of descriptive qualities, groups should read their quotes to the class and then share their list of traits. As each group shares its list, display

Figure 2

Mary Anne Bell is the type of person who

_____.

She also seems to be

_____.

Other traits of her personality include

_____.

Her words show that she experienced

_____.

the responses so all students can see the ideas generated, keeping each group's list separated. Ask the groups to elaborate on why they arrived at those qualities. Then ask the class members to see if they notice any similarities between the groups' lists.

Next, identify which groups received quotes from the same person, and ask the class for help in making generalizations about each character. Let students share their ideas, and ask them to work in their groups to write a preliminary personality profile of their individual. Encourage students to use qualities they generated as well as those in the lists of corresponding groups. To help students start their profile, provide each group with a template of four to five prompts that correspond to the character's quotes.

Figure 2 is an example of an opening stem using the character of the previously illustrated quote. For this profile stem template, students can fill in the blanks as illustrated in Figure 3.

As students complete their profiles, emphasize that profiles are preliminary because they are only based on a limited amount of information. Then, introduce the passages that the quotes came from, and instruct students to look for additional quotes that support, modify, or refute the personality profile that they have created. After reading the passages aloud to the class, have students return

to their enhanced personality profiles to discuss what new insights they may have about the character or what modifications they would make.

When the personality profiles are polished, have the groups share their creations. As a class, compare and contrast each group's profiles. Continue the discussion by asking students to explain why they think those similarities and differences exist. Finally, ask students to describe how the passages and the characters' words convey messages about the characters and their experiences. With sufficient modeling and guided practice, the goal is for students to be able to identify and elaborate on self-chosen character quotes later in the instructional term.

Extensions and Student Feedback

There are a number of possible extensions that could be done with the "Character Quotes" strategy. For

Figure 3

Mary Anne Bell is the type of person who *wants to be immersed.*
She also seems to be *self-confident in a dangerous environment.*
Other traits of her personality include *a passion and fascination for her situation and wildness*.
Her words show that she experienced *the intensity of Vietnam and the war*.

example, students could use authentic primary source letters written by military personnel during times of conflict to complement O'Brien's text. When used together, students can compare the words of a real person to those of a fictionalized character. This comparison would encourage students to explore possible differences between the messages and how they represent each writer's intent. Another extension could be to have students respond to a writing prompt that asks them to share

a significant experience. The Character Quotes" strategy could then be repeated using anonymous passages from the students' own writing. This personalized activity would show students that all writing, including their own, reveals insights into who they are and what they experience.

After using the "Character Quotes" strategy throughout the semester in combination with O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*, faculty observed that students had higher levels of focus and comprehension while reading. Upon reflection, a student from a freshman composition course stated, "I noticed I was actually paying attention because I was looking for something when I read. I wanted to see if my profile was right." Students also made significant connections to the text and developed deeper understandings of the characters' experiences. A student from the same composition course commented, "I felt more interested in learning about [the character] as I read and finding things to support what I first thought about him." Whether this strategy is used with a common-read program or for an individual class, "Character Quotes" is an effective, easily modified strategy that successfully enhances students' reading skills.

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References

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