

What Makes the Writer Write?

Summary

Students study Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* to gain insight into a classical piece of fiction and to understand how writers respond to social conditions. Students also consider how that response is important today.

Time Frame

7 class periods of 90 minutes each

Group Size

Small Groups

Materials

Software

Word-processing, presentation, multimedia-authoring

Hardware

VCR, laserdisc, or DVD player

Background for Teachers

In a high school literature unit, students study Dickens's *Great Expectations*. The unit asks students to:

- Study Dickens, how he wrote, and what motivated his writing

- Research and report on the social context of Victorian society

- Examine how literature translates into film

- Respond to literature and other students' critiques by e-mail

- Read the works of contemporary writers who address social conditions

- Identify problems in contemporary society and respond to them

By selecting appropriate materials and resources, teachers can adapt this learning activity for students whose first language is not English.

Instructional Procedures

COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH

Groups of students, working collaboratively, research Dickens: his life, his concerns, his style and use of figurative language, his plot construction, his work as a publisher, and his experiences as a reformer. Students also study works of Dickens that have been made into films or adapted for theater.

Other collaborative groups research the social context of the Victorian period: women's rights, education, the prison system, and social classes. Students scan appropriate images from print sources, accurately citing those sources in their own works; download information from the Web as they share their research by e-mail; and gather the materials they need to build presentations.

Students use new media as well as printed publications to conduct this research. To help students cope with the shifting problems of research, raise questions such as: Where can I find resources? How do I search? What evaluative criteria are appropriate when a Web search produces thousands of Web pages?

Each group of students prepares a multimedia presentation for the class. As students read the novel, presentations are held at appropriate points. For example, students researching the

prison system make their presentation early on, when Dickens portrays the first convict as a dehumanized animal. The teacher and class evaluate presentations using a mutually devised rubric, combining measures for depth and breadth of content as well as quality of presentation. The follow-through on this part of the unit includes a class discussion on the capabilities and limitations of technology.

MEDIA STUDY

For a film study of *Great Expectations*, use videotapes or digital versions (e.g., DVD, laserdisc) of David Lean's 1946 version, the BBC series, or other versions. Digital copies and multimedia-authoring software, such as HyperStudio, make it easier for students to explore how different filmmakers establish character. (Compare, for example, Dickens's verbal description of Miss Havisham, Lean's gradual revelation, and the Disney version. Play the video and discuss analogies between verbal and visual language.) Other areas that lend themselves to this type of examination are (1) setting, (2) emotional tone, and (3) mood (atmosphere). Perform a Web search on *Great Expectations* through www.hotbot.com/. Movie-related sites, although not long-lasting, have considerable detail and comparative information.

CLASS DISCUSSION

Help the class develop several threads of discussion based on different aspects of the novel, including social issues that emerge. Extend the class discussion through e-mail interchanges broadcast to the entire class as well as through a few online, electronic class meetings. Occasionally examine printouts of these exchanges to monitor student participation and class progress.

At crucial points in the reading, students discuss the relationships that emerge among the characters. Before these discussions, present a visual representation of the relationship. Students create and compare their own visual representations. (See the following example.) The class discusses the ways in which Dickens appears to have perceived and been affected by various social conditions. Before this discussion, make a web of ideas-an expert system, so to speak. At the close of the discussion, each student compares his or her web with the class's web.

The class shows how the events in *Great Expectations* could happen today. (Consider the setting of Third World countries.) Students create their version using video clips and images from the Internet. The project objective is to justify why the chosen setting and circumstances are parallel to the original story.

CRITIQUE OF SOCIETY

Follow-through includes students' examination of the same issues in contemporary society. Based on what they know about Dickens from their research and the opportunities he had for expression, students start their speculation by asking: How would Dickens react to this today?? The class brainstorms social conditions that mirror those of Dickens's time: social class, diversity, the penal system, and education. Students speculate on the questions: How would Dickens react to today's problems? What choices would Dickens make today? Working individually or in groups, students choose a problem to focus on and a way to respond. For example, one student writes and publishes fiction based on an issue of prejudice; another student uses a photographic essay to document local social conditions that lead to crime; another creates a Web page that links sites that promote activism on a specific rights issue. One group mirrors Dickens's methods and arranges to learn more about the local police by taking a citizen awareness course, going on the beat with a police officer, and presenting the experience to the class in a multimedia log. Another group of students produces a video documentary on issues of social class. Assessment for this part of the unit is based largely on the reaction of a larger audience.

A STUDY OF TODAY'S AUTHORS

Students' outside reading should concentrate on contemporary writers who are responding to social issues, for example: Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago*, John Grisham's *The Chamber*, or Stephen King's *The Shawshank Redemption*. Students collaborate on a class timeline (posted on a classroom bulletin board or a class Web site), placing younger authors on a timeline with Dickens. Posting student notes about contemporary social conditions helps students grasp each author's relationship to Dickens.

Extensions

This activity combines elements from many teachers' classrooms as well as my own experience. Kate Breen of Louisville, Kentucky, has pioneered research into weaving Victorian social research into the teaching of Dickens's novels. Many ideas here have grown from the summer 1997 National Endowment for the Humanities seminar "Serial Production: Dickens Bleak House" held at the University of California-Santa Cruz.

Assessment Plan

Students develop a rubric for evaluating presentations. Consider audience response to each presentation.

Hold conferences with students and keep a record of class participation.

Compare with students the iterations of student-developed concept maps.

Bibliography

The Utah Education Network received permission from ISTE (The International Society for Technology in Education) to share this lesson.

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