

Teacher to Teacher: Trade Book Teaching Ideas from the OLRC Reading Group: "Baby"

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Summary. A family (parents, daughter, grandmother) living on an island in New England finds a baby on their doorstep with a note asking them to care for her temporarily. They begin to love the baby, even though they know they will have to say goodbye, and through the process of becoming attached to the child they are able to deal with the grief of having lost their own child.

Introductory Notes: This is such a powerful little book. There's a lot here to work with instructionally. These suggestions are kind of "minimalist"-- I really think the book must be read and reflected upon mostly personally and individually. If I were reading this book as a student, I'd be annoyed by too much intrusion.

Nancy Padak

Teaching Ideas

Chapters I and 2: Teacher reads aloud; students read along or just listen (student choice). Then do one (or more, but don't overdo it) of these:

A. Pick one character from the story. Father, Mother, Larkin, Lalo. Go back through the chapters. Look for words or phrases that describe your character. Add other words or phrases, if you wish. Now develop a character sketch for your character-- What is your character's personality. What does he or she look like? How does he or she get along with others? What makes your character happy, sad? Add other ways to describe your character. Make notes about your ideas. Share with others in the group.

(Note to teacher: Sharing can involve small groups who focused on the same character or small groups with mixed characters. In either event, as students share, others should respond by indicating their agreement, by adding other ideas, and so forth.)

B. Think back through these first two chapters. Then answer these questions. Be ready to share with others in the group.

1) How does the story make you feel? What does the story make you think about?

2) Where do these feelings and ideas come from? What parts of the story cause them? What parts of your own experiences cause them?

3) What is the most important thing that has happened in the story so far? Why do you think so?

C. Find words and phrases from the first two chapters that describe the setting of the story. Use some of them (or others that you wish to use) to write a cinquain. A cinquain is a 5-line poem. Lines have different numbers of syllables: line 1 - 2 syllables; line 2- 4 syllables; line 3- 6 syllables; line 4- 8 syllables; line 5- 2 syllables. Share your cinquain with others in your group.

Chapters 3 and 4: Do as a Directed Reading-Thinking Activity.

[Note: See attached explanation.] Stopping points: (1) p. 21, middle (right after "This is Sophie. She is almost a year old and she is good."); (2) p. 22, near bottom (right after "... Call the police," he said.); (3) p. 23, bottom of page; (4) p. 25, end of chapter; (5) p. 28, middle (right after "I followed him."); (6) p. 30, at square; (7) p. 31, near end (right after "Lalo saw Papa's expression and his smile faded."); (8) p. 32, end of chapter.

Chapters 5 and 6: Students read silently or orally, if they have had the chance to practice first. Then do one or more of the following:

A. Go back to the character sketches you developed after Chapters 1 and 2. Make changes based on what you have learned about your character. Share your ideas with others in your group.

B. Work with a partner to describe the family in the story. Find parts of the story to support your ideas.

C. Think about the next section of the book, which is called "Winter." What do you expect to happen? Why do you think so? Write down some of your own ideas. Then share them with others in your group.

Chapters 7 and 8: Students read silently or the teacher reads orally (or a combination). Then ask pairs or groups of three students to (a) read the following statements, (b) decide if they agree or disagree with each, (c) discuss the reasons for their opinions, (d) make notes of the discussion, and (e) be prepared to share their thinking with others in the group.

The family did the right thing by taking Sophie in. The family is doing the right thing by not talking about the baby who died. Lalo is a good friend for Larkin. Words are all we've got.

Chapters 9 and 10: Students read silently. As they read, ask them to underline (or write out) sentences that seem very important to them. When students have finished reading, ask them to form groups of three and share these important sentences with each other. As group members listen to the sentences that others have chosen, they should respond by indicating agreement/ disagreement, elaborating, etc.

[Note: This is Terry Horste's "Linguistic Roulette" strategy.]

Chapter 1: Teacher reads aloud. Do Bleich's heuristic with the Edna St. Vincent Millay poem (p. 85). Ask learners to develop individual responses to these questions and then to share their ideas with others. A whole class sharing session can also be added, if desired:

(1) How does this poem make me feel?

(2)What parts of the poem cause these feelings? What from my own experience causes these feelings?

(3)What's the most important word in this poem? Why?

Chapters 12 and 13: Students read by themselves. Then:

A. Go back to your character sketch. Make changes. Be ready to talk about your reasons. Share with others.

B. Find another person or two and just talk about the story so far. 'You might use questions like these to get discussion going: What do you like so far? What don't you like? What has surprised you? The next section of the book is called "Spring." What do you think is going to happen? Why do you think so?

Remainder of Book: Students read by themselves. Culminating activities might include:

A. Just talk about the book. What did you like? What didn't you like?

B. Talk about the setting of the story. Does the setting make a difference? Why do you think so?

C. Talk about the characters. Which is your favorite? Why? Do the characters seem realistic? Why?

D. Recast a favorite scene into Readers Theater format. Practice and perform for the rest of the group.

E. "Sketch to Stretch"-- Each student sketches what s/he considers to be the most important part of the story. These are shared in small groups. The discussion should focus the importance of the depicted scenes to the overall story.

Field Testing: These teaching ideas were field-tested in a rural ABLE program with a small group of learners who had neither worked together as a group before nor read a novel in their ABLE class. Both men and women were in the group. Reading and activities took place twice each week for 30-45 minutes per session. The book and related activities took 14 sessions.

Teacher's Changes: The teacher read aloud a bit more often than the plans above indicate. Some learners asked to read aloud, so volunteers did, after adequate time to practice. Learners became interested in the characters and the plot line, so discussions about what was happening in the story and about the characters were interspersed with other teaching activities. The teacher also noted that learners were initially unsure about working in groups and that they needed "continuous encouragement and assurance that they were doing the activity'correctly.'" This insecurity diminished after a few sessions.

Finally, the teacher noted that several learners expressed some concerns about writing, especially writing complete sentences and spelling properly. The teacher attributed this to lack of opportunity to write. She encouraged learners to jot down ideas in words or phrases as a way to prepare for writing

sentences. Throughout the book, learners' oral contributions were more elaborate and thoughtful than their written contributions.

Readers' Responses: Learners enjoyed the story from first chapter to last. They also enjoyed discussing the plot; several related story elements to their own experiences. The teacher commented that the DR-TA (and a chapter read as a DL-TA) was very successful in promoting discussion and encouraging learners to make predictions. The "agree or disagree" activity (chapters 7 and 8), Linguistic Roulette, and the activity with the poem were also very successful.

Several times throughout the book, the teacher asked if learners were enjoying the story and related activities. Responses were always enthusiastically positive. In fact, several learners asked to take the book home. The teacher's final comments were, "Ever,/one really enjoyed this story. They are looking forward to reading another book."

The teaching ideas were also field-tested in an urban program, with a tutor and her student, a woman in her mid-30s, working one-on-one. Reading a novel was also unfamiliar to this student, whose previous work with the tutor had involved use of Orton Gillingham techniques for dyslexic students. In this case, too, both the book and the teaching ideas were resoundingly successful. What follows are excerpts quoted from the letter that the tutor sent to the OLRC, except that we refer to the student by initial rather than name:

"K. became engrossed in *Baby* immediately during the session in which I read chapters one and two to her. She took the book home to guide her as she completed assignment A and ended up reading ahead because she enjoyed the book so much. Reading *Baby* was thrilling for K. It's hard to describe how much she enjoyed it, but maybe these two examples will help you see the impact the story had on her.

"First, K. was so enthused about the story that she continually kept her family and her best friends updated on what was happening in the story thus far. Reading the book was so exciting for her that she couldn't help talking about it! This gave her a good chance to talk with others about her reading....

"Second, reading this book and doing the assignments that you suggested helped K. see that she wanted a change in lesson format. K. would like to set aside the basal reader and focus strictly on ... [reading] novels, [writing] about them, ... and [doing] activities similar to the ones you suggested. K. explained that she knew she hadn't been particularly happy with her previous curriculum, but she didn't know that reading "lessons" could be like this.

"...[T]he book really gave her a new, stronger enthusiasm for reading. I think that K.'s other tutor and I would not even have considered a short novel at this point in K.'s studies without your pilot project. I hope that other teachers and students will benefit from your suggested materials and lesson plans the way that K. and I did."

Reference

Jarvis, P. (1983). *Adult and continuing education: Theory and practice*. Second edition. New York: Routledge.