

Teacher to Teacher

Teaching Ideas from the OLRC Reading Group

A Couple of Kooks and Other Stories About Love

Author: Cynthia Rylant
Title: *A Couple of Kooks and Other Stories About Love*
 New York: Orchard
ISBN: 0-531-05900-6 (this book is back in print)



Summary: All of these eight short stories are appropriate for ABLE or ESOL classes, and some will work well in Family Literacy settings as well. The focus of the stories is on the small details of the wonder and delight that love can bring.

Teaching Suggestions

These six stories are effective in adult literacy situations.

“A Crush” Use the Think, Pair, Share strategy to have students focus on the characters of Ernie and Dolores. Have students stop reading at the end of page 6, and again on page 12 (after “That was the end...”), and finally at the end of the story. At each stop, students should a) think about the 2 characters and make notes about them. After the first stop, students may also want to revise their previous notes based on new information in the story, and b) share their ideas in pairs or small groups. At the end of the lesson, students could complete Venn diagrams about the 2 characters, or discuss/write about the love that Ernie felt.

“Certain Rainbows” Use the Bleich heuristic to support students’ response to this story. Have students stop reading twice, at the end of page 34 and again at the end of the story. At each stop, ask them to make notes about the following: a) How does the story make you feel so far? b) What has the author done to make you feel this way or think these things? What in your own life adds to these feelings and thoughts? and c) What’s the most important idea in the story? Why do you think so?

After the students have made notes about the above questions, invite them to share their ideas either in small

groups or as a whole group. Post-reading activities might include a discussion of the reading process that focuses on the interaction between information provided by the author and students’ prior knowledge and experiences. Students may also wish to write a letter from the grandfather to the granddaughter, in which he gives her advice for living.

“His Just Due” The Directed Reading-Thinking Activity (DR-TA) will work well with this story. Suggested stops are a) page 44, middle, after “In the truck stop...” b) page 47, middle, after “He set down his cup” c) page 49, after the end of the first paragraph, and d) at the end of the story. Follow-up activities could include writing or discussion about these questions: a) What does the title mean? Why do you think so? b) How often do people get their “just dues”? Why do you think so? and c) Is the story realistic? Why do you think so?

“Do You Know That Feeling?” Before students read, explain to them that this story is written as a letter from a daughter to a mother. While they read, ask them to think about how they would respond to the daughter if they were the mother. Students may want to make notes about their ideas.

After reading, ask students to write letters to the girl in the story as if they were the mother. Ask them to consider what they think the daughter should know. Encourage them to share their responses with the group.

“Clematis” Ask students to read this story (or read it to them). Then use the Bleich heuristic. Ask students to make notes about each of the following questions: a) How did the story make you feel? What did it make you think about? b) What did the author do to make you feel this way or think these things? What in your own life adds to these feelings and thoughts? and c) What’s the most important part of the story? Why do you think so? Provide students with opportunities to share their ideas with others.

“A Couple of Kooks” Find an article about teenage pregnancy. Ask students to read both the article and the story. As they read each, ask them to make notes about how the pregnant teens are characterized. After reading both, ask students to compare and contrast the views of pregnant teens. A comparison-contrast writing activity could conclude the lesson. [Note: If students cannot read the nonfiction independently, you can read it to them. If you do, stop occasionally while reading to give students time to make notes.]

Additional discussion or writing (or both) might focus on how Suzy and Dennis behaved like children and how they behaved like adults. Students may also wish to evaluate the ways Suzy, Dennis, and to some extent their families handled the situation of Suzy’s pregnancy.

Field-Testing

One story, “Certain Rainbows,” was field-tested in an entry level, non-traditional class in effective skills at a community college. The students, both male and female aged 18-40+, worked in small groups of six people. The teacher adapted the activity to include three study skills from the course of study for a take-home assignment. She chose the selection for its appeal to a broad range of ages. Although she did not use Bleich’s Heuristic, she did ask her students to respond to the questions in an essay. The project was well received. However, the teacher expressed disappointment that there was little disagreement with the old man’s views. She questioned whether her students knew “how to analyze someone else’s views before agreeing with them.”

Another story, “Do You Know That Feeling?” was field tested in an urban GED preparation class of five African-American women, all of whom were grandmothers. All the students enjoyed the story. They also genuinely enjoyed the writing assignment. The activity encouraged very close and careful reading. The students’ responses were thoughtful and careful.

Students also paid attention to inferring character by description of behavior. For example, one woman wrote that the boy’s mother might have been so nice to the girl because she was looking forward to having someone take him off her hands. Another student wrote from the perspective of the mother trying to comfort the daughter for not being alive to talk things over.

The story, “Clematis” has been used with great success in several teacher in-service workshops on using trade books in the adult classroom.

Student Responses

“Do You Know That Feeling?” One student responded paragraph by paragraph. Her responses were not superficial. She tried to teach the girl about life and men, complete with examples and suggestions.

“Certain Rainbows” “Personally, I can understand his point of view. I feel that love is the most important part of life. Being in love is a wonderful thing and can be as pleasant as the old man described. On the other hand, love can knock you off your feet as soon as you get up, every time. I don’t see love through his eyes, but can understand why he feels the way he does about love. Maybe one day I can say the wonderful things he said.”

“The one thing that I didn’t agree with is that the author seems to suggest that you have to be old to understand life. That’s not true.”

“I guess when I’m in love at 75, I would love just the essence of being alive. I would also enjoy the spontaneity of the mere existence of the one I care for by my side. I guess I would wear funny clothes for my wife when I was in love, if she likes it.”

Note: Instructions on how to use the teaching strategies mentioned in this article can be found on the OLRC Eureka Web site <literacy.kent.edu/eureka/strategies/index.html>.



