

If you come softly: An online novel study

by Sharon Hurwitz and Sigrid Bomba

How many times have you felt that you were being treated unfairly because of who or what you are? Believe it or not, all of us have experienced the same feelings at some point in our lives. We are going to ask you to read a novel about a couple of teenagers who face prejudice, which eventually changes their lives. As you read this fictional novel, we will ask you to complete some activities that will help you analyze the novel as well as the motivation behind some of the characters' feelings. Your final activity will be to create something that can be used to help stop the prejudice we see in today's society.

These were our words to the students as we began our first foray into virtual instruction for students. In Hampton, Va. we have come a long way with online instruction over the past year. One year ago, we had one teacher and one staff development coordinator who had the vision to use the power of the Internet to teach in a different way. With a trial version of Blackboard and a year of training under our belts, we began teaching teachers to develop short courses for staff development. Within one year, we went from one four-week course to thirty courses, ranging from two weeks to seven weeks in length.

Expanding On-line Instruction

This fall, we began looking for ways to expand our online instruction – to include students as well as our teachers. Including narrative literature into our content courses is, and has been, one of our major areas of the School Improvement Plan. Understanding the fact that some of our reluctant readers are more at home in a virtual setting than in the classroom, we decided to move a novel study into the virtual arena. Sigrid had been awarded an International Reading Grant for integrating narrative and expository text in previous years. For these reasons, a novel study was our natural choice.

We know that the reading process is the academic core of education. At the high school level, narrative literature, along with reading instruction, typically resides exclusively in the English classroom. Additionally, we know that students are diverse in their reading preferences. Some students prefer the narrative text, where they readily identify with characters and assimilate information at a higher rate than if they were reading an expository text. Expository texts rarely require the student to connect emotionally to the content of the course. Textbooks offer data without the nature of human relationships. Expository texts also offer one perspective without the richness of diverse cultures. For these reasons, we were anxious to offer our students an opportunity to participate in a language-rich course where

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narrative and expository texts were fused. But we were limited because neither of us has a classroom with students anymore. We knew we would have to find a teacher who would be willing to use our project with his or her students.

Establishing Goals and Objectives

So how did we decide who would be the audience for our project? We sent out a message to all the teachers in our school telling them that we were interested in doing an online student project and we got back several responses. A business teacher intrigued us with her situation: two small classes of multimedia/desktop publishing and the added enticement of having special needs students. What more could we ask for?

We approached her with the plot for a novel that was important to both of us. *If You Come Softly*, by Jacqueline Woodson, is a young adult novel told from the viewpoint of a bi-racial couple. We asked if she would support having the students read the novel and complete a number of projects, all of which would fit her competencies. She was willing, and we got to work.

Our formal objectives were mostly from the English Standards of learning:

Students will:

- identify the characteristics that distinguish literary forms.
- use literary terms in describing and analyzing selections.
- explain the relationships between and among elements of literature: characters, plot, setting, tone, point of view and theme.
- explain the influence of historical context on the form, style, and point of view of a written work.
- read and follow instructions to use computer software, assemble, or construct models or equipment, or complete a project.
- use writing to interpret, analyze, and evaluate ideas.

We meticulously read the novel several times and divided it into sections. We wanted students to read a section (1-3 chapters) and then complete a project that would fit the competencies of the multi-media/desktop publishing course. We also required that they participate in a discussion about what they had read as they went along.

The Syllabus and Student Work

Introduction

Just as the book begins with an Introduction, so should you. In the book's introduction, we learn many things about the plot and the characters. Read through the Introduction and decide what we know about them. Then introduce yourself with a picture and personal profile.

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Discussion Board Student Entry:

I'm kind of anxious to get started on this book, seeing as how I'm a little behind. Since this story is a bit of a love story, I'm sure it'll be pretty interesting. At least, I hope so.

Chapters 1 and 2

The first two chapters introduce the two major characters and their similarities as well as their differences. As you read these chapters, you will describe what you learn in an illustrated T-chart, created with Microsoft Office.

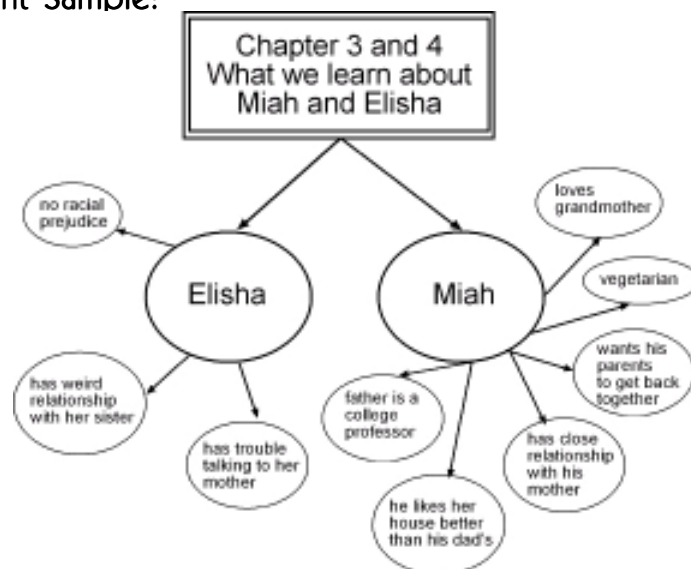
Discussion Board Student Entry:

Chapters one and two are interesting. When I started to read chapter one I figured it would be about Jeremiah and chapter 2 would be about Elisha. Which that is how they were set up. I figured that he would be into basketball. Elisha and her mother are similar in the sense that they both look out the window and see that they are not living like they would like to. The mother would have liked to live life a little longer as a teen than to have to grow up so quickly with marriage and being pregnant. Elisha would like to hang out with her female friends more and to find a good friend to talk to. But, she does not fit in right off because she is keeps to her self, it seems. I think Jeremiah has a close family and Elisha's family is not so open. So far, the book is all right.

Chapters 3 and 4

Characterization is important in all stories, but there are many different ways to tell us about characters. In chapters 3 and 4, we learn about the main characters by learning about the secondary characters. As you read these chapters, you will use *Inspiration* to create a graphic organizer showing your notes.

Student Sample:



Online novel study, continued

Discussion Board Teacher Entry:

[Students have read that the two main characters have fallen in love.] So many times, in our own lives, we dream that everything is perfect. Then, slowly we realize that there are problems that we either chose not to see or couldn't see because we were blinded. Have you ever heard the expression, "Love is blind?"

Discussion Board Student Entry:

Yes I have heard of "Love is Blind" I heard this saying everywhere. I think a lot of people are blinded by love. Some people just chose not to see things but at times they do or someone tells them, the person who is in love tries to make it seem like that person is so good or act like the things that person did was nothing because they don't want to leave their love and they don't want to be lonely. Some just cant let go.

Chapters 5 and 6

In chapters 5 and 6 we learn even more about our two main characters. While reading these chapters, we will begin a vocabulary log and the initial stages of writing summaries.

Discussion Board Student Entry:

The theme is going to be the acceptance of different types of relationships. All relationships will be different. They will consist of different shapes, colors, and sizes. Not every person will date a white if they are white or Asians just dating other Asians, and so on and so on. People will date whom they like and whom they want. This is showing that people are not different and others have to deal with the fact that not everyone will think like you. They will end up going out with each other.

Chapters 7 and 8

One of the best things about reading a novel is finding ourselves. Sometimes we see ourselves in a character or in the way a character reacts to a particular situation. Other times, the setting of a story will bring back a childhood memory. In this section, you will create a Table with information.

Discussion Board Teacher Entry:

I have also experienced some of this situation. When I was born, I was not born Jewish. I met my husband when I was 28 and decided to convert to the Jewish religion for him. He didn't care that much, but in the Jewish faith, the children are not born Jewish unless the mother is Jewish. It is a "matriarchal" society - the mother determines the faith of the child. So, I decided to convert so our children would be Jewish. I'm glad I did, although my own Christian family had some problems accepting my decision.

Online novel study, continued

Discussion Board Student Entry:

Wow, that must have been tough. I can relate to this novel in some way, I may not be white but I am mixed. I am a quarter Filipino, black, Spanish, and Indian it's like I have to go through the same situation that Jeremiah and Ellie had to face. One time I was involve with this boy who was half Puerto Rican and black but his mother was pure Puerto Rican. She wanted him to be with a Puerto Rican girl and I thought that it was wrong because me and her son was very happy, but she didn't like the fact that I wasn't pure Puerto Rican. It really doesn't matter what kind of race you are or skin color racism will still be a main factor or just discrimination it's self.

Chapters 9 and 10

Some people are lucky; when they read words, they see images in their brain. This means that the right side of their brain is working with the left side of the brain (the right = visual images while the left = words). In this section, you will use clip art to illustrate your notes.

Chapters 11, 12, and 13

Here's your challenge! Take these three chapters and write a 20-word summary.

Chapters 14, 15, and 16

Now here's where you'll need your vocabulary log. You'll need a minimum of twenty words, and you will use *Inspiration* again to create a different type of graphic organizer.

Discussion Board Student Entry:

Stating that this book has a deeply motivating and self-capturing story that makes you think about your own life. I think that's when a book does its job; when you stop reading for a second and think about your life or something about that book that just makes you wonder...

Chapters 17, 18, and 19

Unfortunately, prejudice has been a problem throughout American history. As you read these three chapters, think about the different types of prejudice you've read or heard about. Then, you will conduct research on the Internet and create a hot list showing what you have found.

Chapters 20, 21, and 22

Authors use descriptions of places and locations to tell us about their characters. In these chapters, you will take notes on the homes of the characters in a three-column table.

Online novel study, continued

Chapter 23

This chapter contains the climax of the novel - the point to which the author has been leading the reader for the entire book. You will use *TimeLiner* (software) to create a plot line of events leading to this point.

Discussion Board Student Entry:

I think what happened to Miah makes you reflect on how hard and unfortunate life can sometimes be. Everything could be going great, and next, things just turn sour and go bad. That's why it's important to live every moment to the fullest. I read in a book somewhere about a person who had a near-death experience. Afterwards, that person decided to live everyday like it was her last because she had no idea which day would be her last. I think that's a good way to live.

Chapters 24 and 25

For these two chapters we will create a memorial using clip art from either the internet or software located in the library. You will need to channel the emotion of these chapters into your creation.

Discussion Board Student Entry:

I lost my grandfather, both actually. I was kind of young though and I wasn't that close to either one of them so I didn't really have but so much grief over it. I was very sad and time to time I think about both of them and sometimes I try to remember what I can about them. The worst thing about their deaths, is the fact that both of my families kind of fell apart. Especially, the wives. One of my grandmothers is still suffering from being a widow. They had been married for a long time and together even longer and my grandfather, both grandfathers, were very good men. It's hard to let love go. You want to hold on to love forever and when it's over all you can remember is what it meant to you and how it felt to you to be loved and to love.

Chapter 26

In this last chapter of the novel, we realize that Ellie is still "haunted" by the memory of Jeremiah. You will write an unsent letter, either for her or for yourself.

Discussion Board Student Entry:

Simply we can all get along in this world. This book is the key to peace among minorities. The book tells you, you have to give respect to get it. To me it also tells in life there are no stop signs. So why fight over something like racial prejudice? The book's message is the two couples that are black and white, if they can get along so can everyone else. There is nothing wrong with interracial relationships. People have a lot of nerve thinking you have to be the same color as a another just to have a relationship with that person.

Online novel study, continued

Final Project

In this final project, which will count as a grade all by itself, you will create an iMovie showing the consequences of prejudice, which we will broadcast on the HCS school channel.

Assessment of the Project

As a part of our assessment, students were given a survey highlighting key components of the course such as length of the course, choice of novel, preference of activities, and preference of methodology (On-line vs. classroom). We were extremely pleased with the results. Most of our students preferred the use of the narrative text rather than following textbook assignments to complete their Desktop Publishing course requirements. The Discussion Board proved to be the favorite among the students. They enjoyed the casual interaction and the opportunity to discuss the novel with a deeper understanding.

When we ran the course this time, we limited it to one teacher and two classes. Being the technology-driven, devoted-to-reading teachers that we are, we assumed that, as soon as the teacher and the students started the project, they would willingly jump into the discussions about the novel and they would love doing all the projects. Just as you would expect, the reality was quite different. The students were not happy that they had to read at all – “This isn’t an English class; you can’t make us read.” And they looked at us as if we were crazy – “You aren’t even our teachers; what makes you think you can come in here and give us all this extra work!” These quotes summarized the general feeling of the students.

But we plugged on, coming into the classroom at least five different days, walking them through logging into the site and participating in the discussions, making sure that they knew what they were supposed to do. Of the eleven students who continued with the project (one dropped out of school; one moved; and one just refused), they all participated in the discussions regularly with insightful postings.

So, what did we learn from having this first online novel study? We learned that we need to turn the project over to the teacher in the classroom and not be the ones seen as the leaders. But we did enjoy getting back into the classroom and developing relationships with the students. One girl visited us before the Christmas break to give us candy canes, while another shared some of her “secret poetry” that she had been writing.

This first experience with a student online course was an interesting and exciting change for the students and for us. We look forward to expanding online options for the students in Hampton.



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Article Resource URLs

Inspiration
<http://www.inspiration.com/>

Timeliner
<http://www.tomsnyder.com/classroom/timelineronline>

iMovie
<http://www.apple.com/imovie/>

References

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