

## What Our Sixth Graders Need to Read

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### INTRODUCTION

Let me go straight to the point. Anyone who has gone through the middle school reading curriculum is expected to be capable of reading works written by great writers, past or present, who have contributed works of great value to our civilization such as Homer, Plato, Virgil, Machiavelli, St. Augustine, Dante, William Shakespeare, and Hobbes. This is a valid expectation since the middle school curriculum is aimed at leading students to the “mature stage” of reading, a stage when they can already read on their own, and assimilate their reading experiences, i.e., to carry over concepts from one piece of writing to another, and to compare the views of different writers on the same subject. (Adler and Van Doren, 1972) If we want our students to be truly prepared for these challenging materials, it is imperative that at the sixth grade level they be introduced and exposed to works with more profound themes, more complicated structure and vocabulary, and with broader historical, socio-cultural, and psychological contexts. At this level, students should already read **great works of literature**.

As a language arts teacher, I have always believed that reading **great literature** is essential to the development of my students’ knowledge about human civilization, to the formation of their skills, habits, and attitudes as readers, and to the nurturing of their inherent capability to read. By ‘great literature’ I am referring to those written works that have the capacity to engage the whole person, the imagination, as well as the intellect. These are works that form us, not just as readers who engage in academic activities, but also as persons who participate in humankind’s search for meaning. By “essential” I mean that these works have to be taught and read during our students’ academic foundation years, if we are to instill in them the habits of mind that characterize a self-reliant thinker, learner, and reader. On the other hand, it also means that failing to provide our young students the opportunity to read these works could deprive them of the chance to learn the “aesthetic qualities, timelessness, and universality” that these works provide – qualities that are not available in lesser works of literature (Bloom, 1988).

Throughout the years that I used **great literature** as the focal point of my reading curriculum, I have seen a lot of students turn into readers who could think for themselves, and who had the persistence of mind to search for meaning. In the Philippines and in Japan, where I taught for more than twenty years, I saw students engage in communicating complex ideas using a language (English) that is not their own, and expand their own thoughts by reading about cultures and traditions that are different from theirs. Consequently, many of them have become enthusiastic, lifelong readers. It is due to these experiences that I naively assumed, when I first came to teach in the U.S. a year ago, that most reading teachers here share my belief about the value of great literature.

But I was wrong. Or at least that was how I felt when I realized that a majority of the current crop of teachers at my school are convinced that the reading classroom has to be a place where mass culture (i.e. movies, television, music videos, advertising, cartoons, and performance art) can provide short cuts to turning the students into knowledgeable, skillful, and habitual readers (Delbanco, 1999).

My realization came during a recent English department meeting that was aimed at deciding a standard reading list for all our students at my school. The moment came when one teacher reacted angrily to the inclusion of *Anne Frank*, *Oliver Twist*, and *Animal Farm* to the list by saying, “Students are just not interested in reading those books!” This reaction, validated by similar consenting views by almost all teachers in the department, suggests that the interest value of books based on what students deem as entertaining has become the primary criterion for choosing what our students must read in the classroom. Consequently, this preoccupation with the mundane and trivial has legitimized the inclusion in the curriculum of such titles as *The Imp That Ate My Homework* and *Fright Time*, to mention just a few.

What has brought about this attitude in education? Tracing a historical account on how American education, in general, and language arts teaching and learning, in particular, have changed from the knowledge-driven curriculum of more than forty years ago to its current skill-driven form is necessary in order to have a broader understanding of this disturbing trend. However, this paper just doesn’t have enough space for such a synoptic pursuit. Nevertheless, one thing that we can do, given this limitation, is to examine the current catch phrases and slogans that characterize today’s educational approaches; from these we could glean some insights into the mindset of the majority of today’s educators.

### **Rereading Current Slogans**

E.D. Hirsch, in his introduction to his core curriculum series *What Your K - 6<sup>th</sup> Graders Need to Know*, observes the unexamined acceptance by many teachers and parents of such oversimplified slogans as “critical thinking” and “learning to learn.” These slogans saturate most of our educational pursuits; in fact, their partial insights have been recently elevated to the level of universal. (Hirsch, 1993) Sound-bytes coming from school administrators and managers, down to trainers and teachers have been the many variations of the following themes: “What students learn is not important; rather, we must teach students to learn how to learn,” or “The child, not the academic subject, is the true focus of education,” or these more imposing commandments such as “Do not impose knowledge on children before they are developmentally ready to receive it,” and “Do not bog children down in mere facts, but rather, teach critical-thinking skills.”

We have heard these admirable, humane, and – up to a point – true sentiments, and most of us have eagerly followed their positive spin by putting more emphasis on the teaching of skills and of understanding in our daily grind in the classroom. But for

reasons that baffle common sense, we have ignored, and even worse, stopped the teaching of important knowledge in our rush to follow the trend. Hirsch rightly observes that those who have entered the teaching profession for the past forty years have been taught to scorn important knowledge as “mere facts,” and to see the imparting of this knowledge as somehow injurious to children. (xix) I think this trend bodes ill for the state of learning and teaching at my school and in many other schools in the country.

### **Adverse Effects**

I have experienced first hand the adverse effects of this one-sided approach to teaching to my students, to my teaching, and to my classroom. As individuals, my students have become too impatient to learn, overly demanding of their right to consume entertaining and perverse materials in the classroom, and very indifferent to the ideals of education. As a group, they act as if being in school and working hard for academic achievement are anathema to what they consider “cool.” With students like these in the classroom, instruction is almost impossible, especially because a significant amount of my time is spent on classroom management instead of academic activities. Disciplining and motivating the students under these circumstances can leave even the most dedicated teacher frustrated and demoralized. With students who are too engrossed about themselves to pay any attention toward schooling and education, and with the state of teaching that has become hostage to students’ needs, it is easy to understand how “messed up” the classroom has become. Populated by teenagers who think that this public space is but a mere extension of their television and Nintendo-dominated living room and bedroom, they expect activity-laden lessons planned like reality TV, paced like music videos, facilitated like videogames, and presented like MTV.

It would be unfair to say that all these problems are caused by a simple misjudgment on the choice of readings. As a matter of fact, the reasons are many, ranging all the way from various kinds of deprivations in the home environment – economic, social, and/or intellectual (including parental illiteracy) – to personal problems of all kinds (including total revolts about “the system”), and to a curriculum that is so preoccupied with standardized tests. On the surface these justifications seem acceptable enough to excuse the dismal performance of most students at my school. But while knowing what causes a problem can be helpful in solving that problem, knowing the causes that we have just cited above, is not helpful at all to any teacher who may wish to improve the situation. This is because these problems are beyond and outside our duties and responsibilities, and there is only so much that we can do to help our students overcome their off-school problems. As has been pointed out earlier, de-emphasizing the importance of carefully chosen readings shortchanges our students’ chance at improving themselves, academically and personally. Our continued failure to give due importance to the value of challenging readings to our students pushes us deeper to the vicious cycle of student indifference towards education and our desperate measures to get their attention.

Certainly, these problems are not only confined within the four walls of the classroom. In the real world outside, the consequences are no less disturbing. In a famous passage by Allan Bloom, a keen observer of the American mind, in which he captures the effect of rock music on the young, one right away sees the blithe hedonism that permeates the lives of many Americans:

Picture a thirteen-year-old boy sitting in the living room of his family home doing his math assignment while wearing his Walkman headphones or watching MTV. He enjoys the liberties hard won over the centuries by the alliance of philosophic genius and political heroism, consecrated by the blood of martyrs; he is provided with comfort and leisure by the most productive economy ever known to mankind; science has penetrated the secrets of nature in order to provide him with the marvelous, lifelike electronic sound and image reproduction he is enjoying. And in what does progress culminate? A pubescent child whose body throbs with orgasmic rhythms...life is made into a nonstop, commercially prepackaged masturbational fantasy.

It is understandable why the above passage has been much castigated by ultra-liberals. It paints an accurate picture of what happens to people reared in an educational milieu that are interested mostly with what is entertaining. But Bloom is not the lone voice in the desert. Many others have lamented the deteriorating qualities of teaching and learning in many schools across grade levels, even at university levels. Andrew Delbanco (1999) narrates an incident at an English lecture where a speaker discussed a “pornographic performance artist.” “The artist,” informs the speaker, “sells flashlights to anyone in the audience wishing to give her a speculum exam. By looking down at the mirror at just the right angle, she is able to see her own cervix reflected in the pupil of the beholder, and thereby, fulfill the old Romantic dream of eradicating the distinction between perceiver and perceived.” The lecturer had a winning phrase for this accomplishment, “the invaginated eyeball.” One wonders why a “pornographic performance artist” is being talked about in a university. She sells. That is why. It is not hard to imagine how many eager students lined up to see and listen to this perversity than to a lecture on Shakespearean tragedy.

The examples above are meant not just to shock you into rereading skills-driven teaching from a different, or more accurately, critical light. They are intended most of all to argue for a return to great books, to a return to teaching that puts a premium on knowledge. This is my reason for attending the Houston Teachers Institutes seminar, “Reflections on a Few Good Books,” and this is my goal for this curriculum unit.

### **Curriculum Objectives**

The objectives of this curriculum unit is to provide the students with learning situations where they can use their analytical skills to discuss the depths of insights and complexities of language of some great works of literature. At the end of each lesson,

they will create a journal that uses some of the expressions found in the selections, and that relates the insights learned from the readings to their personal life. Specifically, this unit aims, first of all, to have students learn commonly shared knowledge of the human experience; second, to develop reading skills that will enable them to reach the mature stage of reading; and third, to nurture the students' inherent love of reading. Although stated differently, these objectives reflect some of the more crucial sixth grade objectives listed in the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS), particularly the following:

Objective 6.14: The student reads to increase knowledge of his/her own culture, the culture of others, and the common elements of culture.

Objective 6.11: The student expresses and supports responses to various types of texts.

Objective 6.10: The student comprehends selections using a variety of strategies. (Project Clear, language arts, sixth grade, p.14-16)

## **WHAT TO TEACH: GREAT WORKS OF LITERATURE**

In the preceding discussion, I have stated the reasons why I cannot subscribe to the idea that the dual processes of teaching and learning must acquiesce to the dictates and perversity of what is entertaining and fun. I am convinced that in order for learning and teaching to be effective both processes must prod students to overcome the challenges of "levels of difficulty," to probe depths of meaning, and to encompass the breadth of knowledge. Despite today's very liberal climate in the choice of readings, as what has prevailed at my school, I still adhere to Mortimer Adler's belief that works of great literature must be read because they make us "wiser, in the sense that we become more deeply aware of the great and enduring truths of human life" (Adler and Van Doren, 1972).

### **Hierarchy of Books**

In *How to Read a Book*, Adler and Van Doren classify books into three classes. They estimate that more than 99 percent of the millions of books that have been written in the western tradition alone will not make sufficient demands on readers for them to improve their skill in reading. These are books that can be read only for amusement or information. The amusement may be of many kinds, and the information may be interesting in all sorts of ways, but one should not expect to learn anything of importance from them. In fact, one doesn't have to read them analytically at all. Skimming will do.

The second class of books is that from which one can learn not only how to read but also how to live. Less than one percent of all books belong in this class. These are the good books, the ones that are carefully wrought by their authors, the ones that convey to the reader significant insights about subjects of enduring interest to human beings. There are in all probability no more than a few thousands of such books. They are worth reading analytically – once. These are books that you read once and then put away on

your shelf. How do you know that you do not have to read such books again? Adler and Van Doren suggest that you monitor your own mental reaction to the experience of reading them. Such books stretch your mind and increase your understanding. But as your mind stretches and your understanding increases, you realize that you are not going to be changed any more in the future by this book.

Of the few thousand such books there is a much smaller number that cannot be exhausted by even the very best reading you can manage. How do you recognize these books? Again, Adler and Van Doren describe a mysterious process whereby after analytically reading such book to the best of your ability, you have a sneaking suspicion that there is more than you got. You find that you cannot forget the book, that you keep thinking about it and your reaction to it. Finally, you return to it, and discover that the book seems to have grown with you. You see new things in it that you did not see before. Such book belongs to the highest class, the very small number of **great books**. These are the books that will teach you the most, both about reading and about life. They are the books to which you will return over and over.

There is something of a classical paradigm in the way that this hierarchy of books is presented. Plato, in *The Republic*, describes a “magnificent myth,” wherein God fashioned men so that gold was put in the composition of the rulers; a lesser metal, silver, in the auxiliaries; and mere iron and bronze in the farmers, and other workers. (BK. III) Plato uses this hierarchy to explain the benefits of having a rigid classification of people in a just society. He argues that if everyone knew his intrinsic worth and would remain content to stay where he is, we would have an end to social envy. Many centuries later, Machiavelli picked up this paradigm to explain the three kinds of mental ability. In *The Prince* he writes:

And because there are three kinds of brains: one understands on its own, the other discerns that which others understand, the third neither understands on its own nor through others; the first is most excellent, the second excellent, and the third useless; it must needs be by necessity, therefore, that if Pandolfo was not of the first rank, he was of the second: because whenever one has the judgment to know the good or evil that someone does and says though he is without invention himself, he will know the minister’s bad and good works, and he will extol the latter and correct the former; and the minister cannot hope to deceive him and thus keeps himself good. (Chapter XXII)

What this classification suggests is that the first two kinds of brains are of use to society, while the third, as Machiavelli curtly says, is “useless.”

There are two implications of these frames of thinking to our job as language arts, teachers. First, these rigid classifications of books and people suggest a predetermined matching between mental abilities and social status, and the three kinds of books. This means that the “gold” people who have the “most excellent” brains are predisposed to

gravitate towards the great books, and they do not have to stretch themselves trying to understand these books because they are born with the mental capacity to do so, anyway. The “useless” minds of “farmers and other workers,” on the other hand, will never be attracted to, much less understand, those great books, no matter how hard they try, because they are just not mentally equipped to do so. It is with the “silver” people who are mentally “excellent” that our job as educators would be more useful. Since these people have enough mental ability to understand good books, we can provide them with appropriate learning situations and challenging materials to raise them to a higher level.

Clearly, this paradigm stands in direct contrast to democratic principles that promote equality in education. Many would contend that it is elitist conceptions like this paradigm that hinder universal education. A closer look at the realities of our educational system, however reveals that our promotion system does thresh out the mentally unsuited population, and provide more educational, and thus, more career opportunities for the more “excellent minds.” In fact, a recent study estimates that most of the students in the nation’s major universities and 4-year colleges come from the top 20% of the population, and that a majority of college graduates from every field of scientific study had IQs between 110 and 120. (Jones, 1982) The other 80%, whose mental capacity is lower than a 110 IQ, is left to do jobs equivalent to what Plato classifies as “farmers and other workers.” The ideas of Plato and Machiavelli may not be democratic, but they do have a better grasp of the realities of human potentials.

This leads us to another implication. If we go by the argument that the attainment of our educational goals is more possible with the population that has the capacity to “discern that which others understand,” then our curriculum must be geared towards addressing the needs of this population. What are we to do, then, with those whose mental capacity Machiavelli considers “useless?” Sensible teachers must be able to modify the curriculum to the level appropriate to the various needs of those students. The curriculum should not be designed simply to meet minimum expectations. It must have expectations higher than what the 20% of the population can do, although it must also be flexible enough to include the rest of the population. Thus, when choosing topics and formulating objectives for the curriculum, we must prioritize first the “enduring, complex, engaging, and big ideas,” because only these will lead to more deepening and broadening of knowledge and skills. Those that are “important to know” and those that are “worth being familiar with” (like those interesting and fun books we have referred to earlier in this discussion), may be taken up next, although at a much reduced time. (Wiggins and McTighe, 1998)

## **TEACHING GREAT WORKS OF LITERATURE**

Having argued why reading great works of literature is essential to the education of our students, the question that remains now is: How do we teach these works? This section will discuss the teaching strategies used in the curriculum unit. We will begin with the

reading list and how the works in this list were chosen, and then end with a short description of the lessons.

## **Reading List**

For this curriculum unit, the following works will be studied: *The Ring of Gyges* (excerpt from *The Republic*), *Romeo and Juliet* by William Shakespeare, *The Book of Job* from the *Old Testament*, *I Have a Dream* by Martin Luther King Jr., *The Road Not Taken* by Robert Frost, *Musee des Beau Arts* by W.H. Auden, and the classic myth, *Icarus and Daedalus*. This list begs the question, On what basis were these works chosen? Before we discuss the teaching strategies used in this unit, it is important to explain, at this juncture, the criteria for choosing these readings.

## **Criteria for the Choice of Readings**

Adler and Van Doren argue that works of great literature can be read by anyone who has reached the elementary reading level. This claim, however, raises some serious questions. In practice, is it really possible for sixth graders to read through the overwhelming lengths and encyclopedic background information of such works as *The Dialogues of Plato*, or *The Confessions of St. Augustine*? Even more realistically, will students, of the kind found at my at my school, be able to handle the level of difficulty of these works? Are sixth graders psychologically and mentally ready to explore the depth and complexity of insights inherent in these materials?

On the first question, it is indeed not possible for sixth graders to read any of the great books in their entirety and in their full version. These works, however, are peppered with many short analogies and anecdotes that could be read separately without sacrificing much of the essence of the works. Many of the analogies found in Plato's *The Republic*, for example, could be read independently from the book. These analogies – *The Ring of Gyges*, *The Analogy of the Cave*, and *The Story of Er* – are excellent examples of stories that can be analyzed on their own, or used as illuminations of the philosopher's complex ideas. On the question regarding the book's level of difficulty, one only needs to search the web to find hundreds of simplified versions of many of these works. The Great Books Foundation and the Core Knowledge Foundation are but two of the most notable sites in the Internet that produce modified versions of great works of literature. The best versions are those that adjust the vocabulary and language structure to a level that is comprehensible to sixth graders, but with the same depth of insight and complexity of meaning as in the original. The Core Knowledge Foundation's retelling of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* and *Julius Caesar* are some of the best examples. The third question addresses a developmental psychology issue. Without any doubt, there are great works of literature that appeal to sixth grade children because these works' subject matters and themes relate to world events or to emotions that are beginning to engross young



adolescents. Homer's story of the Trojan War, for example, would interest teenagers in the same way that such movies as *Star Wars*, or *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* attract them.

The skeptics among us may argue that these are all easier said than done. This is a valid argument, given that you cannot force students to read materials that they think are too difficult to them. Careful selection of these materials must be done. The readings in this unit are chosen because they meet a set of criteria I deemed necessary to achieve the curriculum objectives. These criteria are determined by our primary educational goal – to develop in all students the knowledge, skills, habits, and attitudes that characterize successful readers. What are these criteria?

First and most important, the readings enumerated above are the kind that appeal to the maturing inquisitiveness of sixth graders. Twelve-year-olds love to talk. They are at an age when they begin to talk about relationships, the future, and of life's many mysteries. Furthermore, sixth graders are also starting to participate in collaborative search for meaning in a work. Given these, the kind of readings suited for this age group must, therefore, invite and support a variety of interpretations. Only selections that are sufficiently rich in ideas, and in which the author's meaning is not explicit, will invite interpretive questions that even sixth graders are capable of asking. *The Road Not Taken* and *I Have a Dream*, for example, are chosen because they are thematically complex and cohesive, and because they suggest real answers – that is, interpretations that can be supported with evidence from the text rather than merely being a matter of personal opinions.

Every piece of literature requires interpretation to some degree, but not all works lend themselves to interpretive analysis. The fact that a work has a lot of “talking points” is no guarantee that it can support collaborative and interpretive discussion. It may be beautifully written and uplifting—something that every young person should have the opportunity to experience—but if its meaning and intention are transparent to the individual reader, it cannot challenge the mind of young people. For example, not all stories in the *Old Testament* are suited to the collaborative discussion we want to happen in the classroom. Our selection, *The Book of Job*, does invite more discussion than the more widely known story of *Joseph and His Brothers*, despite the fact that both touch upon many of the same themes.

The story of Joseph tells the story a young man who, after being sold as slave by his brothers, overcomes all difficulties and becomes successful in Egypt, and who, in the end, forgives his brothers and reunites with his father. It is a vivid tale of forgiveness and sibling rivalry, and an inspiring model of filial piety and magnanimity. In this story, however, the motives of the characters are clear, and the story's outcome raises no particular questions or problems of understanding in the reader's mind. There is nothing paradoxical or curious about the story that invites further reflection or demands explanation. There are no further questions to explore.

The story of Job, on the other hand, is problematic. Here we are led more deeply into themes of faith, divine justice, reward and punishment, and obedience. This *Old Testament* story tells of how God makes a wager with “the Adversary” (the King James version actually calls him “Satan”) that his servant Job, a pious and prosperous man, will remain faithful in reverence no matter what catastrophes he endures. With God’s permission, Satan destroys Job’s animals, servants, and children; and brings boils and other diseases and sufferings to Job himself; so that the baffled man, conscious of his innocence – or at least of not having committed any sin – is reduced to sitting on the ground and scraping his body with ashes. As we read the story we wonder, “Do we get what we deserve in this life?” By asking such question, students are able to go beyond reading the story of Job merely as a religious text. They are able to appreciate the book’s subtle portrayal of profound human weaknesses and concerns, and to understand and gain insights from the character of Job, who offers his faith, even though God is incomprehensible and unjust.

Second, the chosen readings for this unit raise genuine questions for the both the students and teacher. In other words, a reading must not only be challenging to students, but it must be interesting to teachers as well. Providing selections that speak to both teenagers and adult helps ensure that classroom discussion will be a collaborative effort. In preparing for discussion, teachers, instead of relying on a teacher’s manual, or look for an answer key, experience the same kind of intensive engagement with the text that can, as a consequence, encourage in their students to read a selection several times, to note whatever they find puzzling or thought-provoking, and to write interpretive questions that express their own search for meaning in the work. An engaging book or a teacher is one that can move them to personalize the questions that the book poses. This can, as a consequence, allow the students to experience their teacher in a new role—as an active and involved partner in the collaborative discussion. The intellectual respect engendered by this relationship will encourage students to find answers within themselves, and thereby move them to take responsibility for their own learning.

The analogy that best describes this criterion is when a parent reads selections aloud to his or her child. In order for a parent to read with enthusiasm, he or she must choose books that have the kind of universal, ageless themes and rich, lively language that engage both themselves and his or her child. The parent will not choose readings that have explicit sexual references, or a story in which the narrator recalls childhood experiences in order to address adult concerns, because these would be unsuitable for his or her child. The parent will also not choose stories that are too ironic, or too adult in tone or point of view.

*Romeo and Juliet* and *I Have a Dream* were specifically chosen in the light of this criterion. The youthful love between Romeo and Juliet and the conflict between their families could make for an interesting exchange of ideas regarding youthful

urges, fate, parental authority, and family pride. In *I Have a Dream*, the speaker could easily be likened to a parent committed to making the future of his oppressed children more hopeful and free.

Third, the readings are limited in length so that students can read each selection at least twice, and work with it closely. Reading works with deep insights and complex themes demands concentrated work over a period of several days. Doing this trains students to read closely – to examine details and draw connections – with the purpose of working out answers to difficult questions or interpretations. In this curriculum unit, I decided to use E.D. Hirsch’s short story version of *Romeo and Juliet*, instead of Shakespeare’s original, so that students will have more time to read and reread the story, to take and share notes, to write questions about the overall meaning of the story, and to engage in thoughtful discussion – instead of laboring through the number of pages to try to finish them in time for the discussion.

Fourth, the readings in this unit are appropriate to the developmental psychology of the students. The primary consideration for choosing which reading is age-appropriate is the suitability of its theme and style for a particular grade, rather than to standard assessments of reading levels. This requires judging whether the reading’s philosophical and problematic ideas are presented with due consideration of the reader’s intellectual and emotional growth. The classic myth chosen for this unit is one of the most thought-provoking readings for this age group. By presenting universal themes in a manner that can touch the inexperienced mind of a teenager, myths like this one, can give expression to such childhood concerns such as the need for self-control and the consequence of disobeying one’s parents, like the themes explored in *Icarus and Daedalus*.

Students in the middle grades may still be attracted to the magical and the fantastic, but they are also now beginning to develop preference for readings that treat their concerns in more realistic contexts. This is the reason why the poem, *The Road Not Taken*, is included. This work addresses sixth graders’ anxiety about the future, and initiates them to a more serious look at life. This poem may not be engaging to the students right away, because the students have not yet developed their ability to understand poetic language. But I believe that a teacher who readily recognizes the merits of examining the thought-provoking issues raised in these works, will be creative enough to present the works in an interesting way. Teaching students to understand and appreciate great works of poetry can help students broaden their tastes and ideas. Furthermore, I believe that students can maximize learning when they are given the chance to grapple with challenging works because it allows them to ask and seek answers to the question, “What does this mean?”

## Teaching Strategy: Shared Inquiry

The main teaching strategy that I will use in this unit is the discussion technique called Shared Inquiry. Patterned after the Socratic dialogue, Shared Inquiry is a distinctive method of learning that allows students to search for answers to fundamental questions raised by the text. This search is inherently active; it involves taking what the author has given us and trying to grasp its full meaning, to interpret or reach an understanding of the text, in the light of our experience and of sound reasoning. The strategy is collaborative and question-driven.

In Shared Inquiry, the students learn to give full considerations to the ideas of others, to weigh the merits of opposing arguments, and to modify their initial opinions as the evidence demands. Since the strategy promotes thoughtful dialogue and open debate, the students have ample opportunities to practice communicating complex ideas and in supporting, testing, and expanding their own thoughts.

The teacher acts as discussion leader whose role is to guide students to reaching their own interpretation. He does this by posing thought-provoking questions and following up purposely on what the students say. In so doing, the teacher helps them develop the flexibility of mind to consider problems from many angles, and the discipline to analyze ideas critically. The teacher, as discussion leader, is a non-expert and a member of the group. The advantage of taking this role is precisely that he is not an expert and does not lecture to the group. A guiding principle in this technique, then, is that a group can reach substantial insight into a work by building upon one another's ideas. The leader's role is to advance this learning process through careful questioning.

The dialogue in the classroom should happen this way: The teacher opens discussion with a **basic interpretive question** that genuinely interests and puzzles him or her. The students, then, offer their answers to the teacher's question and to one another's comments. The teacher furthers the discussion by asking appropriate **follow-up questions**. Discussion is meant to flow like a conversation, with participants addressing and questioning one another directly. The teacher/leader will frequently **draw the group back to the text for evidence** to support interpretations raised in the discussion. These references to the text help to keep the discussion focused and free from tangents and generalizations. For this technique to be effective, however, both teachers and students must follow some basic rules.

First, only those who have read the selection may take part in discussion. Students who have not read the selection cannot support their opinions with evidence from the text, nor can they bring a knowledge of the text to bear on the opinions of others. Second, discussion is restricted to the selection that everyone has read. This rule gives everyone an equal chance to contribute, because it limits discussion to a selection that all students are familiar with and have before them. When the selection is the sole focus of discussion, everyone can determine whether facts are accurately recalled and opinions

adequately supported. Third, support for opinions should be found within the selection. Students may introduce outside opinions only if they can restate the opinions in their own words and support the ideas with evidence from the selection. This rule encourages participants to read carefully and think for themselves. Fourth, teachers may only ask questions—they may not answer them. Leaders help themselves and participants understand a selection by asking questions that prompt thoughtful inquiry. Adherence to these guidelines can best promote the kind of focused and in-depth discussion we aimed for when reading great works of literature.

The success and effectiveness of a curriculum are only as good as the methodologies and strategies that teachers use in implementing the lessons in the classroom. The Shared Inquiry technique matches perfectly with the kind of readings this curriculum teaches. Using this method of teaching guarantees the achievement of the curriculum objectives we have enumerated earlier in this discussion.

### **Learning Activities**

This curriculum unit has 6 lessons that run through six weeks of learning. All lessons follow a format that guarantees a complete learning cycle. Skipping any part of this format could lessen the incidence of learning. Every lesson begins with an invitation to settle comfortably in *The Reading Armchair*. This is the pre-reading part of the lesson. Here, students are given background information about the reading, or a short warm-up activity that is aimed to either “whet their appetite” or check their background knowledge of the story, author, and theme; or to diagnose if they have enough reading skills to handle the material. Some vocabulary words could also be learned at this point, especially those words that are crucial to a deeper understanding of the reading. At the end of this pre-reading activity, the teacher poses the basic interpretive question that captures the main theme of the reading. The teacher then gives the students enough time to read the selection.

The students are then led to step into *The Discussion Arena* for a Shared Inquiry discussion of the reading. This part of the lesson follows the format and guidelines of Shared Inquiry described in the preceding section of this paper. Being the most important part of the lesson, care should be taken to make sure that all students participate in the discussion. I would recommend an arena-type seating arrangement to allow for better interaction among the students and teacher. Here, more vocabulary activities could be done to ensure a clearer understanding of the text. To complete the learning experience, students are then taken to *The Writing Workshop*, where the students are taught how to put on paper the many insights they have gained from the reading and the many thoughts that have come to their minds during the discussion. They will be taught how to write their papers as clearly and as precisely as can be.

## *Ring of Gyges*

For the first week, the students will read *Ring of Gyges*, a short analogy from Plato's *The Republic* (a.k.a. Book II). The basic interpretive questions are: Would anyone be law-abiding if he were not afraid of punishment? Would anyone pursue justice for its own sake? Or would he simply get away with whatever he could?

Plato's dialogues consist of conversations with Socrates and some representative young men of the Athenian aristocratic class. One of the fellows egging on Socrates – Glaucon, a friend trying to get Socrates to make the best case possible for justice – tells a strange and maliciously undermining story. It is the myth of the Ring of Gyges. In the old kingdom of Lydia, a shepherd, Gyges, removes a gold ring from the corpse of a giant. When sitting with the other shepherds, Gyges begins playing with the ring, turning the jewel in the inside of his hand. Suddenly, he realizes that the shepherds are talking about him as if he weren't there. With the jewel turned inside, the ring makes him invisible! Glaucon continues:

Having made his discovery, he managed to get himself included in a party that was to report to the king, and when he arrived seduced the queen, and with her help attacked and murdered the king and seized the throne.

Imagine now that two such rings existed and the just man put on one, the unjust the other. There is no one, it would commonly be supposed, who would always have such iron strength of will as to stick to what is right and keep his hands from taking other people's property...the just man would differ in no way from the unjust, but both would follow the same course. (105-106)

The story is simple enough for students to understand, but I foresee several difficulties that might hinder the understanding of the depth and complexity of the story. One aspect is the historical context of Plato's book, and another is the social and cultural milieu from which the story originates. One option to take in order to lessen the difficulty of understanding is simply to ignore the teaching of these aspects. This would result in the students missing an important opportunity, however, to get oriented with the classical Greek history and culture. To solve the problem, a brief video and/or slide presentation showing pictures of ancient Greece could be done before letting the students read the story. Another difficulty is the style of writing. One notices right away -- when reading *The Republic*-- that the sentences are long and the punctuations do not always follow the current conventions. To remedy the situation, the selection could be read orally, simulating the inflections and emphases of certain words to make the oral delivery sound like it is done by the actual personages of the story. Finally, the theme of the story is something that these young people are only now beginning to be aware of. Thus, the problem is how to make the discussion on justice relevant to these inexperienced students. Efforts should be made to relate the basic interpretive questions to the students' immediate and real-life experiences. We could ask the following, for example: Would

you cheat in the TAAS test if you were not afraid of the consequences? If you know that no one will ever know, would you steal a very expensive diamond?

To ensure that the students take to heart the lessons learned from this reading, I would have them write a “what-if” essay: “If you were given a superpower, what would that be and how would you use it? What do you think are the rewards and consequences of your choices?” Knowing how much sixth graders enjoy pretending and playing roles, I would expect “far-out” ideas. However I would know if they really learned from the reading if they temper their ideas with the ideals of justice as explained by the great philosopher, Socrates.

### ***Romeo and Juliet***

For the second week, students will read E.D. Hirsch’s short story version of Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*. This is a compromise I grudgingly have to take because I really want my students to experience the original written work. Time, or the lack of it, is the problem. Thus, this option will have to do for now. Most people, including a good number of sixth graders, already knows the gist of the story of the world’s most famous star-crossed lovers, but what the students certainly do not know are the many interesting background information surrounding the play. Some of these will have to be told to students, as this will add to their knowledge, and ultimately, appreciation of the play.

Like most of William Shakespeare’s plays, *Romeo and Juliet* is based on earlier sources, which in this case, go back to some popular stories in Italy in the late 1400s. These stories were transformed into a poem in English by a poet named Brooke. Today Brooke’s poem has been forgotten, but Shakespeare’s play lives on. One thing that makes Shakespeare’s play live is its remarkable language. But it is that language too, beautiful as it is, that discourages many students to read his works. To students, studying Shakespeare seems like a Herculean task. Our first job, then is to make sure that they have a background on Elizabethan English as it was used during Shakespeare’s time -- more than 400 years ago -- if we want them to enjoy their Shakespeare.

One way to do it is to compare the linguistic differences between Elizabethan and modern English. I would inform the students that Shakespeare used ‘blank verse’ *or unrhymed iambic pentameter*. This pertains to the way you stress your voice and the number of times you do it when reading a line in a verse. With Shakespeare’s you do a succession of one short-stressed and one long-stressed syllables (*iambic*) five times in one line (*pentameter*). I will then have the students practice reading the example below. The underlined syllables are long-stressed.

O, my offense is rank, it smells to heaven;  
It hath the primal eldest curse upon ‘t,

I will point out the succession of five short and long stressed syllable-combinations, and then tell them to study the following lines. They will mark the corresponding syllables, and then practice reading them:

A brother's murder. Pray can I not,  
Though inclination be as sharp as will ;  
My stronger guilt defeats my strong intent,

The second linguistic difference is in the use of grammar. I will explain to the students that Shakespeare was from an era when the pronouns "thou" and "thy" are used instead of "you" and "your." Sometimes, too, the auxiliary verbs are dropped. For example, "*comest thou*" for "**did** you come" and "*make we ready*" for "**let's get** ready." The order of words in a sentence is also different. Modern English places the direct object after the verb. Elizabethan English had it before the verb. For example, "*I might not **this** believe,*" as opposed to "I might not believe this" as we say it today.

Once the students begin to show interest on the play, I will have them read silently the short story version (found in E.D. Hirsch's *What Your 6<sup>th</sup> Graders Need to Know*, p.3-7). Then I will proceed with a Shared Inquiry discussion by asking these basic interpretive questions: Is there such a thing as love at first sight? Do we decide on who to spend the rest of our live, or is our love predetermined by the stars? Which is more important: love or family loyalty?

Throughout the years that I have taught this play, I have not even once experienced any student who does not get hooked, eventually, on the story. The dramatic impact of the story is unequalled, and has the power to attract even the most cynical of kids. The problem then, is not how to get the students involved; rather, the challenge is how to take them to the depths of meaning that the reading offers. Shared Inquiry would be useful to take them through various layers of understanding. To appreciate the play, however, the students really need to do more than just talking about it; they need to "live out" some of the issues in the story. Role-playing can be done to achieve this. Here's one example:

In your hometown there are two families. Both these families are rich and well-respected in the town, but for one thing: they have been feuding for many years. In fact, only recently, a brawl in a street involving these families happened, leaving some members on both sides dead. It is mid-day on a hot summer day. You are in the town center, hanging out. Choose members of your group to play the following roles: 2 family members of the "Brown" family (one of the feuding families), 2 members of the "Smith" family (the other feuding family), and people from the town are not part of the feud. Your task is to create a scene where these forces come into contact with each other. What will happen when the two families meet in the center of town? What will be the reaction of the other people in the town? You'll probably need to think of some good reasons why the feud started, and some interesting ways to address the other people involved in the role play.



Remember that, although the families are feuding, they don't want another incident in the streets. Think through what you will do and say, then be ready to create the scene in front of the class. Once you start, stay with the scene until the teacher stops it. Don't stop playing your characters for any reason!

To evaluate whether the students have learned from the lesson, I will have a creative writing activity to see how much personal relationship they have developed with the text. Asking them to write against the text means to ask them to confront that which makes sense to them. In order to do so, they would need to understand not only the issues raised by the text, but also to feel that the issues raised bear on their own lives. These types of assignment can be structured in several ways: group writing, individual/private writing, working in pairs, etc. Here follows one such creative writing assignment designed for sixth graders:

Pretend that you are telling the story of Romeo and Juliet to a friend who has not read the play. You have followed Shakespeare's plot faithfully until you come to the end of the play. As you pause to take a breath before the plunge, you suddenly realize that you can tell your friend anything you'd like about the ending...Rewrite the ending of the play. You need not, of course, do it in blank verse, but you should feel free to resolve the dramatic situation in a way that is personally satisfying. If you prefer Shakespeare's ending to all others, explore other ways of arriving at the same outcome.

### ***The Book of Job***

We have briefly summarized the story of Job earlier in this paper, so we will go right into the heart of the matter for this reading. After two weeks of doing Shared Inquiry, the students should be familiar already with how it works. If at all possible, have the best student in class take the role of the discussion leader. After giving some essential information about the *Old Testament* and allowing the students a few minutes to read the selection, proceed with the basic interpretive questions. The story is simple enough for the students to understand, so stay back a little and have them direct their own discussion. One difficulty that this work might present to students is the way it is written. Again, reading the selection orally could solve that problem. Doing this could present some opportunities to improve the students' oral reading skills.

The other difficulty is the length of the reading. This is the longest in the list, but compared to *Romeo and Juliet*, it is more manageable, thus I would really recommend that the students read it in its full version. Also, there are reading techniques we could use to save time when reading long materials. One such strategy is called "Jigsaw Reading." Here, the class divides the reading into several segments. One student or group is assigned to read one segment, and the rest of the segments are divided equally among the other students/groups. After a few minutes, each student/group reports to the whole class

the contents of the segment that was assigned to him/them for the whole class to get the whole idea of the story.

To evaluate the depth of insights that the students learned in this lesson, I will ask them to respond, in writing, to the basic interpretive questions that were discussed during the lesson. They must include some of the more important ideas given by other students, and they must support any idea with citations from the text.

### ***Other Lessons***

For the next three weeks, the following selections will be read: *I Have a Dream* (fourth week), *The Road Not Taken* (fifth week), and *Icarus and Daedalus* and *Musee des Beau Arts* (sixth week). It must be evident by now that the way in which the lessons in this unit is arranged is not driven by a linear, theme-based narrative, but rather on the impact a reading has on the next selection. We start with the *Ring of Gyges* because we want to set the tone of the seriousness of discussion when reading works of great literature. With this reading, we initiate the students into the steps and processes of Shared Inquiry; they will have to show a certain level of mastery in the use of this discussion technique in the next selection. We choose *Romeo and Juliet* for our next reading because the students' familiarity with the work will allow them to focus more on improving their interaction during the Shared Inquiry discussion. The third week reading, *The Book of Job*, is a challenging one, and we put it there because we want to test how much the students have grown insofar as interacting seriously with other students in the collaborative discussion is concerned. It would be fair to assume that by the time the students read *I Have a Dream*, they can already do Shared Inquiry independently. It is important to set expectations like this because the way students behave and the depth of insights they share during discussion, are our best gauge to measure how much they have grown in their ability to analyze and discuss ideas. We should set even higher expectations as students progress through the weeks and through the various readings. Aside from monitoring the students' progress in these areas, we must also assess the amount of information and the way they assimilate the knowledge that they get from the readings. Giving them tests is essential to this process, and, at the risk of being labeled "too traditional," I would recommend that students take objective-type tests.

The next readings will contain some "enduring" information that students will have to learn by heart. Details of these will be discussed in the sample lesson plans presented in the section that follows.

## **LESSON PLANS**

### **Lesson Plan One: *The Road Not Taken***

When you're young and inexperienced, making decisions is not always easy. Often you vacillate between two options, or procrastinate between doing something now or later.

The availability of many options also makes it even more difficult to decide. But decide you must, if you want to grow up with character and integrity. The question to ask is “How?”

### ***Objectives***

Student will formulate and respond to interpretive questions regarding the dilemmas and considerations one faces when making important decisions in life. They will formulate their own interpretations of the reading selected for this lesson, and then note and criticize the ideas of other students during the Shared Inquiry discussion. At the end of the lesson, they will write a journal that relates all the ideas they have learned from the reading to their own personal experiences.

### ***Materials***

Copies for students of the poem, *The Road Not Taken*

### ***The Reading Armchair***

1. In small groups have the students exchange their ideas on the following situation. Imagine that you found Aladdin’s ‘magic lamp’ and the genie gave you three wishes. However, you can only choose from among the following: a cure for AIDS, a million dollars, the boy/girl of your dreams, immortality, world peace, good looks and gorgeous body, a superpower, peace of mind, fame, or a luxurious sports car.
2. Listen in while the students are talking. Provide lead-in questions to enhance the conversation, or share your experiences to encourage the students to open up. Get some of the main ideas shared during the talks and share these and your comments at the end of this pre-reading activity.
3. Wind up the activity by telling the students what the reading is (*it is a poem about making choices in life*). Tell them to take notes on the following while reading: Where does the poet see the two diverging roads? Which road does the author choose to take?

### ***The Discussion Arena***

1. Begin by reading aloud the title, author, and other information about the reading.
2. Tell the students that they will read the poem at least twice. The first reading will be a “jigsaw oral reading” involving all students in class, while the second will be individual silent reading.
3. Start the “jigsaw reading:” Read Stanza 1, then have the students paraphrase the scene described in the stanza. Ask: Where does the author see the two roads? Starting from the student closest to where you are located, have them take turns reading the remaining lines of the poem. For example, student 1 reads the first line of the Stanza 2, student 2 reads the next line, and so on. Pause after the last line of each stanza and

have the students paraphrase the stanza. Then ask students some comprehension questions. What time of day is pictured in the poem? What season? How many roads are there in the woods? Describe the roads. What road does the traveler choose? Why? What pronoun does Robert Frost use most? Does such personal reference narrow the scope of these poems? Why? What does the last line of the poem mean? Would you have chosen the road taken by the traveler? Why?

4. Give students a few minutes to go over the entire poem again in silence. They may choose to go over the poem entirely, or to read only the segments that are meaningful to them.
5. Start the Shared Inquiry discussion. If a student is chosen to lead the discussion, allow a few minutes for students to formulate their own basic interpretive questions. If you are leading the discussion, begin by giving a short introduction of the author. Say words to this effect: *Farmer and poet of New England, Robert Frost has found beauty and meaning in the everyday aspects of nature which a farmer knows so intimately, and in the work which fills a farmer's life. In this poem, Mr. Frost chooses between two diverging roads in a wood, and feels his act symbolic of all the choices we must make in life, choices that later on may make all the difference.* Then give the following basic interpretive questions: How essential is it to always make the right decision as you journey through life? Is it possible to always make the right decision? How does the ability to decide build character and integrity? Which is better, to be decisive or to procrastinate?
6. Ask the following follow-up questions to deepen the discussion: Between becoming a movie star and becoming a teacher, which would you choose? You won 2 million dollars in a lottery, how would you spend it? You only have 24 hours to live, what would you do with your remaining time? Explain the aphorism. "Experience is the best teacher" in the light of the poem.

### **Writing Workshop**

1. Explain the purpose of this writing task - to entertain readers with an extended version of the poem, *'The Road Not Taken.'* Tell the students to write a narrative in either prose or poetry form intended for sixth grade readers of your school's literary magazine (if you have any). For those choosing prose, they may write between 200-300 words, and for those choosing poetry, they may write between 4-8 stanzas. Tell them to add characters and to include in their plot, a conflict in a new setting. The narrative should also include a dialogue.
2. Have the students brainstorm their ideas with other students (in groups or in pairs).
3. Have the students discuss their ideas with their partners. Have them analyze which of the ideas they have written would be interesting for the intended readers. Tell them to Organize their ideas into an essay or poem. Suggest how to make their poem or essay entertaining to each other.
4. Check the progress of the discussions between each partner, then ask questions related to their ideas and the way they organize them. Answer clarification questions that may arise.

5. Have the students write their draft. Have the students decide what tone to use in their narrative – light, serious, humorous, etc. Use your notes and your story plans to write your first draft. Explain some writing tips to students. For example, to begin, follow a model could make the writing task less difficult; look into literature textbooks, short story collections, short story magazines, television shows to get ideas and inspirations for your story. Allow students some time to finish a first draft, and then have them show their drafts to their partner for editing.
6. Encourage the students to critique the works of their classmates. Have them choose the best work and justify their choices. Encourage them, too, to turn in their works to the school paper (or other local papers) for publication.

### **Lesson Plan Two: *Icarus and Daedalus***

Aside from this selection being a rich source of insights about parent-child relationship, this reading is significant to this unit because it opens opportunities for students to learn more about classical mythology. It also is very much related to the next poem in the unit, i.e. *Musee des Beau Arts* which uses a lot of allusions to classic myths.

#### ***Objectives***

Students will formulate and respond to interpretive questions regarding the value of parental guidance in their life especially during their teenage years. They will formulate their own interpretations of the reading selected for this lesson, and then note and criticize the ideas of other students during the Shared Inquiry discussion. At the end of the lesson, they will write a journal that relates all these ideas they have learned from the reading to their own personal experiences.

#### ***Materials***

Copies for students of the story *Icarus and Daedalus*, picture transparency of Icarus

#### ***The Reading Armchair***

1. Begin by giving some background information on the reading. Say something to this effect: *A legendary architect, sculptor, and inventor, Daedalus is said to have fled from Athens when he was accused of murdering a young pupil whose skill rivaled his own. He found sanctuary in Crete, where King Minos commissioned him to build the Labyrinth, a maze which housed the Minotaur, a monster said to be half man and half bull. Eventually Daedalus lost favor with Minos and was imprisoned. As Ovid's story begins, Daedalus hopes to escape with Icarus, his son.*
2. Give the students a few minutes to read the selection silently. Then, do a “jigsaw oral reading” with the whole class. Check inflections and expressions as good reading can help in making the story more understandable to the students.

3. Start with the Shared Inquiry discussion by asking the basic interpretive questions: What are your parents to you? How important are their words to you? At what point in your life do you start to become independent from your parents?
4. Ask follow up questions as you go along with the discussion with an eye on deepening students' understanding of the selection Here are some sample questions: What did Daedalus invent to use for their escape? Describe the appearance of this invention. What did Daedalus warn Icarus not to do when flying? Did Icarus get enough flying lessons? Why did Icarus leave his father while in-flight? How and why does Daedalus change the laws of nature? Given the situation, do you think Daedalus and Icarus behave and react like a father and son should to each other? Why or why not? Why does Daedalus curse his talents? Even in a tale as brief as this one a writer can direct our sympathies so that we side with or against the characters. Refer to specific lines in the poem that reveal the personalities of Daedalus and Icarus and tell whether they make you sympathize with the character or not.
5. Ask more questions for further reflections and applications: Myths were sometimes told to illustrate right conduct or to teach a moral lesson. Which of the following lessons might *The Story of Daedalus and Icarus* illustrate? Can you suggest other lessons that might apply? Explain the following proverbs in the light of the reading: "*Pride goeth before a fall,*" "*If the gods had meant us to fly, they would have given us wings,*" "*Take your father's advice,*" "*Don't set your sights too high.*" Can you think of Spanish aphorisms (or "wise sayings") illustrated in this story? Translate them to English and then explain. Do you know of any contemporary fiction, song, movie, play, or poem that is based on the plot and characters of "The Story of Daedalus?" Retell the story in class.
6. Explain what "mythic allusion" means. You may use the following explanation, or words to this effect: Daedalus and Icarus are two characters of Greek Mythology that are often alluded to by other writers both in the past and contemporary times. Once you know these characters, your readings of some other poems become much easier. For instance, if you read the poem by Alastair Reid entitled "Daedalus," you know what the first line means and who is speaking: *My son has birds in his head*. Your knowledge that Daedalus was Icarus' father and that Icarus yearned to fly gives that line meaning. Consider another poem by Nanina Alba, "**Be Daedalus**":

Be Daedalus.  
 Make feathered wings:  
 Bind them with wax.  
     Avoid the parching sun that  
         brings  
     Death as its tax.  
 Suns can be brutal things.  
 Be Daedalus; make wings,  
 If Icarus be unwise  
 And swing up toward the flame,  
     Forget his prejudice and

prize,  
The price, the name.  
Be Daedalus; make wings,  
Make even feathered wings...

Notice how concisely the poet writes by using the **allusion** to Daedalus. The poet does not have to waste words by telling the entire myth. For centuries, Greek, Roman, Egyptian, and Norse myths have provided a rich source of allusions for European and American writers. The allusions establish a universal link among peoples and nations, for, as people learn each other's myths, their awareness of each other's beliefs and traditions draws them closer." Finally, ask the students, "Do you know of any poem that uses allusion? Can you read this poem in class?"

### ***The Writing Workshop***

1. Explain the task to the students: *Write a **personal narrative** about an experience you have had during which you had either strong feelings or ideas. Do not limit yourself to just one paragraph. Do not be concerned that your story may not be dramatic or heroic. Rather, keep in mind that ordinary incidents are the kind most readers can understand and enjoy because they themselves may have had similar ordinary experiences. **Add mythic allusions to your ideas and sentences** in order to deepen the ideas of your work.*
2. Have the students outline their ideas according to the following headings: introduction, body, and conclusion. Encourage them to start with the body as this will include details, and then work back on the introduction, which should contain the general idea of what it is that they are writing about. Have them think of a "clincher" to conclude the narrative.
3. Tell the students that for the body, they may include descriptions of feelings and those that can be perceived through the five senses. Encourage them to make a table of the five senses. NOTE: Among the five senses, it is the sense of smell that triggers immediately the memory activity in the brain. Thus, students should include a lot "smell" descriptions.
4. Show your ideas to your partner. Discuss how you could improve the vocabulary, the crafting of sentences, and the development of ideas into paragraphs.
5. Tell the students to write an initial draft of their personal narrative. Remind them to remember to write a title. Have the students read each other's work with a partner. As one reads, the other asks questions about the narrative. The reader answers the questions and if the answers are missing in his written narrative, he or she takes note of them to decide later whether to include them in the final revision or not. Later, the students and their partners edit each other's work. Remind them that as editor they have to read their partner's draft all the way through before they begin to comment on it.
6. Consider your partner's comments before writing the final paper. Then, submit your composition to your teacher for assessment.

### **Lesson Plan Three: *Musee des Beau Arts***

Despite the rapid advances in technology, the world still has a lot of areas where human suffering caused by poverty, diseases, and war are found. Many people in the world are affected by all sorts of problems. What is your attitude about all these sufferings around you?

#### ***Objectives***

Student will formulate and respond to interpretive questions regarding humankind's attitude toward sufferings of other people. They will formulate their own interpretations of the reading selected for this lesson, and then note and criticize the ideas of other students during the Shared Inquiry discussion. At the end of the lesson, they will write a journal which relates what they have learned in the reading to their own personal experiences.

#### ***Materials***

Copies for students of the poem *Musee des Beau Arts*, transparency copy of Peter Brughel's painting *The Fall of Icarus*

#### ***The Reading Armchair***

1. Start by having students view Brughel's painting *Icarus*. If needed, have a brief discussion on how to analyze the painting. Ask questions about the painting. What do you see in the picture? What do you see at the foreground and in the background? What are the people doing? Is the ship anchored or sailing? The painting is titled "The Fall of Icarus," but where is Icarus in the picture? How do the others react or respond to Icarus' fall?
2. Have the students read the poem silently. Say, "As you read the poem, reflect on how you react to events happening around you. What do you see? What do you hear? Are you sensitive to your environment? Are you aware of other people's problems?"
3. The selection has some words and expressions that have to be understood to improve the students' comprehension of the story, thus, do a short reading comprehension exercise before proceeding with the discussion. Have the students answer the following questions individually first, then have them compare their answers:
  - a) When one is walking *dully* along, he or she is (a) not thinking while walking (b) walking along a dark alley (c) walking without any feeling or passion
  - b) The aged who are *passionately, reverently waiting* for the miraculous birth are (a) hopeful about life after death (b) faithful that there is life after death (c) eager to die



- c) “They” on Stanza 1 Line 10 refers to (a) the aged (b) the Old Masters (c) the children.
  - d) Which is an example of a *doggy* life? (a) nomadic life (b) the life of a hobo (c) a servant’s life.
  - e) One who *leisurely* turns away from disaster is one whose attitude is (a) indifference (b) committed (c) violent
4. Start the Shared Inquiry discussion with the students. Tell the students to reflect on the following interpretive questions: Why is there suffering in the world? Are we made to suffer, or are we made to be happy? Ask follow-up questions to deepen the discussion. Which of the two stanzas directly describes “Icarus?” which one hints at the poem’s theme? Who do you think are the “old Masters” referred to in Stanza 1 Line 2? What do you think is the “miraculous birth” referred to in Stanza 1 Line 7? What is the theme of this poem? How is this theme expressed? What is the tone of the poem? Does the poet treat the theme seriously or lightly? According to the poem, how do people react to sufferings around them? Does the poet suggest that you should react this way, or does he merely describe people’s common reactions to suffering? Have them write their answers first before starting the discussion.
  5. Ask more questions for further reflection: Here are some other attitudes about how to live life. Do you agree or disagree? “Eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow you will die” (from the epic poem “The Rubaiyat”). The Golden Rule: “Do unto others what you would want other to do unto you” (Jesus of Nazareth). Another Golden Rule: “Do not do unto others what you would not want others to do unto you” (Lao Tzu).
  6. Teach students about the importance of being a wide-reader to their studies and to their life. Use the following explanation, or words to this effect: *The literary background of a story could be used to interpret stories that are based on the plot, themes, and characters of some known literary works in the past. If you, therefore, have ample knowledge of literature, you can have a better understanding and appreciation of some of today’s literary works. For example, one who is familiar with the great Greek epics “Iliad” and “Odyssey,” and the equally great Roman epic “Aeneas,” would be able to see obvious and implied parallels of these stories in the movie “Star Wars.” These epics have been a rich source of ideas for many writers of various ages and generations. In fact, one should not be surprised that our contemporary fictional superheroes like Superman and the rest of the Marvel superheroes are patterned after some epic heroes like Achilles. The poem you have just read is based on a Greek myth. Do you know what it is? Can you relate the story in class?* (The students should easily answer this question since they have just read *Icarus and Daedalus*.)

### **Writing Workshop**

1. Tell the students that in this writing activity, they will gather information through unstructured interview, and then write a report based on the responses they gathered. Inform them of the topic of the interview that they will conduct: **Attitude Towards**

**the Plight of Migrant Workers.** Instruct the students to list down all possible questions they think of on this topic, and then choose the most relevant questions by prioritizing the list to just 5 questions. Have the students decide **who** and **how many** to interview.

2. Have the students show their lists to their partner/group for comments. Have them practice reading the interview questions and the appropriate manner of interviewing. Tell them to discuss the ways to record the responses. Will they take notes manually? Will they use a tape recorder? Have the students conduct their interviews.
3. Tell the students to review their notes or listen to the tapes to get the most important ideas of the interviewee. Have them compare the responses. Are their answers similar or different on specific items? For similar responses, what is the main idea? For answers that are different, how relevant are they to the topic? Do they present an opposing opinion? Instruct the students to write these responses in paragraph form. Have the students show their paragraphs to their partners for comments and suggestions.
4. Have the students write the final draft of their report. Tell the students to turn in their papers to you for evaluation. Call some students to read their reports to the whole class. Encourage the other students to react or to make comments on the ideas.

## **EPILOGUE**

If we read for the purpose of becoming a better reader, we cannot just read any book or article. We will not improve as a reader if all we read are books that are well within our capacity. We must tackle books that are beyond us – books that are over our head. Only books of that sort will make us stretch our mind. Unless we stretch, we will not learn. Thus, it is crucial for us to read books that demand that we strive to become better readers. A good reader makes demands on himself or herself when he/she reads. He reads actively, effortlessly. In the same token, the books that a demanding reader need must also make demands on him. They must seem to him to be beyond his capacity. This is not to say that such books are always those in relatively unfamiliar fields like the scientific and philosophical ones. In fact, in many ways, it is easier to read scientific books than non-scientific ones because of the care with which scientific authors help readers come to terms, identify key propositions, and state the main arguments. These helps are absent in poetical works, and so in the long run they are quite likely to be the hardest, the most demanding books that one can read. Homer, for example, is in many ways harder to read than Newton, despite the fact that one may get more out of Homer the first time through. The reason is that Homer deals with subjects that are harder to write well about.

A good book does reward us for our effort to read it. A great book rewards us most of all. These rewards are of two kinds. First is the improvement of our reading skill, which occurs when we successfully tackle a good, difficult work. Second, and this is in the long run (and thus much more important), these books can teach us about the world and about ourselves. We learn more than how to read better; we learn more about life.

We become wiser, wiser about matters that we cannot think too much and too well. These great books can help us think better about them, because they were written by men and women who thought better about them than most people.

## ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

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A classic guide to intelligent reading. The book concretely shows how the serious work of proper reading may be accomplished and much it may yield the way of instruction and delight of reading.

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This provocative book by professor Allan Bloom laments the decay of the humanities, the decline of universities, and the spiritual rootlessness and unconnectedness to traditions of today's students.

de Alvarez, P. *Niccolo Machiavelli The Prince*. Illinois: Waveland Press, 1980.

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The author discusses the reasons why the teaching of English and literature have declined in the last three decades.

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This book describes the author's experiences and insights as a middle age person trying to reread the Great Books at Columbia University.

Hirsch, E.D., Jr. *What Your 6<sup>th</sup> Graders Need to Know*. New York: Dell Publishing, 1993.

Part of the Core Knowledge Series – this book is used in this paper as a reference of the unit's reading list, and as a source of some of the readings.

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This is HISD's curriculum, and used in this paper as a source for Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills.

Jones, J. *The Gifted Student at University*. Gifted International, 1982. pp. 49-65.

An article published arguing for proper identification and assessment of gifted and talented children, and the provision of appropriate educational services for this population.

Plato. *Plato: The Republic*. Translated by B. Jowett. Barnes & Noble Books, 1999.  
Without doubt the greatest and most provocative work of political philosophy ever produced in the West. This book is used both as a reference and as source of one of the readings in the curriculum unit.

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This book explores the following questions and provides practical solution for the teacher-curriculum designer: What is understanding and how does it differ from knowing? What do we want students to understand and be able to do? What enduring knowledge is worth understanding? How will we know that students truly understand and can apply knowledge in a meaningful way? How can we design our courses and units to emphasize understanding?

### **Student Resources**

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