

READING WRITING IN THE DISCIPLINES

Writing Workshop: Using Mentor Texts and Graphic Organizers Video Transcript

Andrew Spinali:

If you could all have your writing journals out on your desk. What I wanted to go over with you guys today, I wanted to build off the conversations that we had about theme. And you can look at the fact that our essential questions up here today are "How do writers develop a theme?" and "How do writers organize their work to help readers see the theme?" So how do writers organize their work in a way that we can figure out what the point is? We talked about the fact that the theme is what the story is really about. And our goal between today and tomorrow is that you'll be able to then look at your own and ask yourself what is my piece really about?

The lesson today focused on taking what we've learned from *The Giver* by Lois Lowry. We've been doing a lot of work over the last couple weeks with theme and how theme develops over the course of a text, and how we have evidence of that theme. And we're always trying to tie it into what can we learn from published authors that can help us become better writers? What might be one of the struggles that you went through while trying to write about the theme?

Student:

Well, I had trouble like making a story connect with the theme.

Spinali:

Making the story connect with the theme?

Student:

Well, if it was like a sad story you're writing about, it's like hard to put it on paper because like you don't really want to think about it.

Spinali:

And a lot of you picked things that... You picked it, Sydney, you picked it. You picked things that are tough to write about, and we appreciate that you were kind of brave enough to do that.

With *The Giver* it was really a great opportunity to build on essays that they've been writing because it's a little more complex than just using good word choice

or having a good hook. It's about developing a theme, and that's something that we really try to spiral back to all the time throughout seventh grade because a lot of times they think the theme is summary.

I've made a sequencing frame here as an anchor chart. And what I've tried to do is capture what *The Giver* was really about. Somebody summarize for me in a sentence – plot – what *The Giver's* about. It's about a boy turning against his society. Yeah, it's about a boy turning against his society. But when I asked you guys on Tuesday what is it really about, you came up with words like what? Brynn.

Brynn:

Determination.

Spinali:

Determination.

Student:

Perfection.

Spinali:

Perfection.

Student:

Love.

Spinali:

Love. All great words, right? So I took the idea of love and I went back in my notes, and I went back on the great chart that you guys built, and I thought to myself, "What is she really trying to say about love?" You guys know all those like deep, inspirational quotes that you see on Tumblr and Instagram, right?

Students:

(giggling)

Spinali:

Where does that come from? Here's mine, I think it's pretty good, okay, and that it's, "Love leads to pain, but without both, life has lost its value." I think I can get some finger snaps for that. I feel like I'm at a poetry reading right now.

We wanted to use this as a chance to maybe bridge the gap between what they're writing in class and what they're reading, and taking advantage of that

chance to make the connection between analyzing theme and then finding themes in your own writing.

The next question is what evidence do I have from that? Where did that come from, okay? So I went through and I sequenced the entire story, okay? And I pointed out the big moments where love was happening or not happening. Up until right here you guys were all pretty upset by the lack of love in this community, right? A lot of you said like it's stiff, it's robotic, it's scripted, there's no emotion. And after I was able to do this and really track love, I thought about what's Lowry trying to say about love? And I came up with this idea of well, you know what, love does lead to pain, and there is pain, and there is conflict, right? But without it, did it have any value? Did their life in the community have any value? No, you were all upset. The whole story about how robotic it was, right? So that's how you start with this theme of love and see how it kind of develops over the course of a story.

With that sequencing frame, what I was trying to show them today in class was the kind of general progression. Lois Lowry is showing us this message about love. My goal was by showing them those eight moments and really analyzing what happened in those eight moments, they would get to see this progression of love. I think for kids, it's a really concrete way to teach a very abstract skill. And developmentally for seventh graders it's very gray as far as analyzing a theme and not having a right answer, which they struggle with sometimes.

What you guys are going to do is the next step. I want you to look back at your piece and I want you to make your own sequencing frame and ask yourself these questions: have you developed your theme? Then after you've done that, is that clear to your readers, and are there places that need further revision? And this is a spot where, you know, all year you guys have leaned on each other and continue doing that. If you're confused, or if you're stuck, ask somebody next to you. So go into your draft, start sequencing it, and I'll be around to check in with you guys and talk to you. Okay, go ahead.

I can't emphasize enough the consistency both of expectations and of procedures in the room and really giving the kids space to make mistakes. Analyzing literature and then trying to transform your own writing is a very messy process. It just takes time for them to get there and they need to constantly spiral back to this idea of theme. They need to be constantly thinking about what am I really taking away from this as a reader and a writer.

What is your piece really about? It's about the... Like what's the inspirational quote that I'm going to say after I read Nathan's that I believe? It's kind of like acceptance?

Student:

Okay.

Spinali:

When I was in school, it seemed like the theory of writing conferences was so the teacher could tell you what was wrong with your piece and you could fix it. And it was very much a one-sided conversation, and that's something I've learned over my five years of teaching, especially with seventh graders is they're ready for that responsibility of being an active member in their learning, and we need to give them that opportunity to be part of the conversation. What is it you're trying to say?

Reading, and grading, and assessing writing is a very long process that I've tried to shorten over the years and there's no easy solution. But I do find it helpful just to really quickly read over, skim over what they're doing, see the structure of their writing, identify any kind of red flags right away. And that allows me then to know and kind of keep a running checklist in my head of, oh you know what, last night Brandon really struggled with this when I read his work, so I need to make sure I sit with him for at least a couple minutes.

What I have here is you clearly have a storyline, and you really have developed the theme. My question was, I was waiting for that moment where I agree with you that it's about having confidence, but you don't really show us how your confidence was shaky, or how you get over it. It's almost like I didn't have confidence, and then I got sick of being bullied, and now I have confidence. It was like turning on a light switch. And we all know that that's not really how it works, so if you're trying to teach us something about confidence, right, just like Lowry did with love, you've got to develop it over the course of the piece. So show us when you weren't confident and build into when you were, Does that make sense?

Student:

Yeah.

Spinali:

We value peer interaction and we value them working together.

Well, I don't really understand what this picnic is doing. Can you like explain that?

Student:

Okay, well, he like called in and he wanted to like make the most of his time with his grandchildren before he like dies. So he wanted to like have a moment with us, so I was just trying to show that like he's living life to the fullest.

Spinali:

When you're starting a writers workshop, I can't emphasize enough routine, routine, routine. Really breaking it down, this is how we talk about writing, this is how we give feedback.

I'm interested in what you have to say, but at the end of the first paragraph I'm a little confused about what it's really about. Can you walk me through that?

Student:

Well, it's about like how I made the choose, and then in the end it was a good thing because I ended up winning like a lot of turns.

Spinali:

And it comes back to the onus of the culture of the room. That all those kids know that they're not doing it for me. They're doing it for each other. You basically needed a wall around you to protect you. Seventh graders are amazing, fascinating creatures because they will hit whatever standard you expect them to hit. If you set the bar up here, they will spend all year reaching for that bar. The higher expectations you have for kids, as long as you offer support to get them there, the better off it's going to be. He says, "If you really want to accomplish something, you have to work at it and learn from your mistakes."