

Teaching 8<sup>th</sup> Graders: A Reflection on my Middle School Field Experience

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## Lesson and Assessment Circumstances

In developing and teaching my first lesson plan to support my cooperating teacher's discussion of *The Giver* by Lois Lowry, I chose to use a companion text, "Revolution" by The Beatles, to encourage my students to compare works, recognize connections, and write analytical statements based on the themes we discussed in a whole group setting. By discussing themes and character traits together, I focused on providing my students with several examples to help them expand their thinking beyond what the text explicitly said and asked them to draw connections from other popular music selections as well as what the text suggested about the main character. Although I taught my lesson to two groups of students and administered the same assignment (see two part assessment below), I was only able to make copies of the second group's responses as my cooperating teacher had already returned the first group's work with her feedback due to gaps in our scheduling. Based on my evaluation of fourth block's assignment responses, I was pleased to note that the majority of the students grasped the concept, but in cases in which they did not, I was able to see how they could have gotten confused in reading my instructions. In reflecting on the assignment portion of my lesson plan titled, Connecting *The Giver* to Music Through Lyrical Analysis & Comparison, I have recognized which elements of my assessment worked well, which elements seemed to cause students to struggle, and how I could adjust my assessment for future lessons to improve it for my students.

### Two Part Assessment:

#### Part 1:

**Writing Prompt:** Now that we have analyzed "Revolution" and discussed how it relates to *The Giver*, the next step is to support our discussion with evidence from the novel. Based on what we have discussed, we can identify similarities and differences between two texts and analyze how a character's actions affect the outcome based on these elements. The major concept we discussed using the companion text involves change, power, and a revolution. In at least three sentences,

please address an aspect of these ideas and explain why it is included, where your claim is supported within the text, and reinforce how your textual evidence supports your claim. Use the formula below and the example starters to guide your analytical sentence development.

### **Claim + Data + Warrant = Analysis**

-Lois Lowry includes rebellion in *The Giver* to show...which is evident in the following quote/passage...because...

-*The Giver* reveals the effects of control and power in a “utopian” society to demonstrate...which is portrayed in chapter...which reinforces...

Example: Jonas’s concluding actions are foreshadowed early in the novel to support his later decisions. One example of foreshadowing Lowry includes that alludes to Jonas’s later rebellion is when he decides not to take his pill, “...for the first time, Jonas did not take his pill. Something within him, something that had grown there through the memories, told him to throw the pill away” (p. 129). Jonas’s act of throwing away his required pill helps set the stage for his greater understanding of the society in which he lives, his independent decision making, his rebellion, and his eventual escape from the Community later in the novel.

### **Part 2:**

**Research Activity:** After you have responded to the writing prompt, I would like you to connect another song (it can be your favorite, older, currently popular, or any genre) and discuss how your selection relates to *The Giver*. **DO NOT select a song that would not be appropriate for school or class discussion, such as one that contains explicit language, references, violent themes, or illegal activities. Keep in mind that if you have to ask if a song is inappropriate, it would probably be a good idea to just select another song. If you have your heart set on discussing an edited version of an originally explicit song, the “clean” version still needs to be teacher approved.** List the title of the song, artist, and ways the two connect on the same paper as Part 1 following the format below:

“Revolution” by The Beatles

This song connects to Lois Lowry’s *The Giver* by:

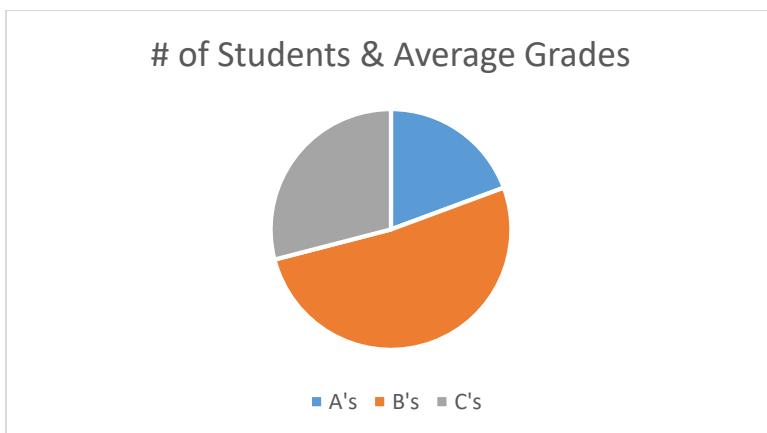
- Explanation of Reason #1: discussing how change is usually considered a radically dangerous idea.
- Explanation of Reason #2:
- List as many connections as you can—the more the better!

### **Assessment Results**

As my cooperating teacher had taken my assessment for a homework grade using a scale based on the students’ effort, understanding, completion, and if they followed directions, ranging

from A+ to C-, as thankfully none of the students failed, my grading and feedback also reflected the commentary she wanted to provide the students in an effort to help them improve for similar assignments later. After grading the assignments, I found that the grades for my thirty-one students were broken down as follows: six A's, sixteen B's, and nine C's (see figure one for overall percentages). In noting this, I am extremely pleased that none of the students failed the assignment, but I am a tad disappointed that the majority of students who made C's did so because they either did not follow and/or understand my provided instructions or they simply did not complete the assignment with very much effort. Although most students received average grades, I think the feedback we provided to individual students will help them become better analytical writers in the long run, such as citing specific textual evidence, using precise language, and expanding their plot summaries to be more geared towards analysis. (To see a decomposition of assessment scores by individual student, see figure two below.) In seeing the students' responses and feedback and reflecting on the lesson as a whole, I have already brainstormed ways I could still use segments of this assignment after I tweak it by adding several improvements.

**Fig. 1: 19% of a total of 31 students made A's, 52% made B's, and 29% made C's.**



**Fig 2: Individual Student Scores**

Student #1	A+	Student #17	B-
Student #2	A+	Student #18	B-
Student #3	A+	Student #19	B-
Student #4	A+	Student #20	B-
Student #5	A	Student #21	B+
Student #6	A	Student #22	B-
Student #7	B	Student #23	C-
Student #8	B-	Student #24	C-
Student #9	B-	Student #25	C-
Student #10	B	Student #26	C
Student #11	B	Student #27	C-
Student #12	B-	Student #28	C
Student #13	B-	Student #29	C+
Student #14	B-	Student #30	C+
Student #15	B	Student #31	C-
Student #16	B-		

### **Discussion and Future Implications**

The components of the assignment that I believe most of the students enjoyed, as only four did not complete it, was the second part on the students' individual song selection that related to *The Giver*. I think the freedom in this small activity not only helped students better

understand ideas and themes in the novel, but I also think that it gave them a change of pace from writing analytical sentences from part one. In using this same song selection research activity, I think I might consider separating this activity from the claim-data-warrant and allow students to present a brief slideshow on how the works relate.

In contrast, the elements of this assignment that I would most definitely revise would include the wordy instructions, transition between activities, and the way this assignment was administered. In reviewing my instructions, I can see how the instructional language I used might have been foreign or confusing to eighth graders, and I think they may have benefited from more thorough explanation even though my class time was cut short on day one. Similarly, even though both of the classes I taught were classified as eighth grade honors classes, I think I should have decreased the content area jargon in the written instructions to simplify the directions to improve their understanding; furthermore, I think high school and college students would be more capable of understanding the major requirements of this multi-part assignment, but I plan to tone down the jargon for middle school students in my future lessons as they are usually only initially exposed to this terminology once they enter seventh and eighth grade.

In simplifying the instructions, I also think that it would have been more effective and efficient to separate the two activities and focus on Claim-Data-Warrant (CDW) analytical sentences in one class period rather than trying to force too many activities and too much writing on students at once. In reflecting on how I condensed the two differing activities and instructions into one assessment activity, I can now see how this was one of the main factors that contributed to students' confusion on what the topics of their CDW statements should be; for example, many students who scored low did so because they used their own song selection in their CDW statements rather than identifying a theme of change we discussed together while annotating

“Revolution.” In changing this assignment for my future students as well as for myself to cover more curriculum standards, I would probably still use these activities to compare and contrast the works, but I would follow our discussion of the annotations with the students’ in-class song selection, and then use consecutive class periods to focus on writing solid Claim-Data-Warrant statements involving themes of change in whole group, small group, and independent practice settings. To follow students’ analytical statement writing, I would then, depending on if I had already covered essay writing, ask them to expand this analysis to write a five-paragraph essay to round out our novel unit for a major grade.

### **Conclusion**

In reflecting on my lesson plan, teaching, and assessment as a whole, I am proud of myself for successfully teaching middle schoolers, and in doing so, I now have several considerations to keep in mind for future planning at the same grade level as well as in developing assignments in general. I am also grateful that my cooperating teacher assisted me in giving feedback to the students as well as giving me personal feedback on how I could alter my lesson for the next time I teach it. Without critically evaluating and reflecting on the contents of my two-part assignment, I do not believe I would have been able to acknowledge how I could adjust my content, instructions, descriptions, and explanations to help my students grow, analyze, learn, and discover to their fullest potentials inside and outside of the classroom.