

Student Maps, Character Maps

While reading *To Kill a Mockingbird* with my students, I came to the realization that, although the sequence of events and their importance were clear to me, my students were becoming lost in the lessons learned by Scout and Jem and the order in which they occurred. One of my primary thematic focuses in reading this novel was the growing up, or coming of age, of the Finch children. In order to help my students grasp this theme, I drew on an assignment I had discovered earlier in the year.

One day, as I was searching for new ideas the way most first-year teachers do, I went to consult with Margaret Palmer, a teacher known for her creative ideas and enjoyable lessons, and I immediately noticed the maps covering the walls.

"What in the world are those?" I asked.

"Maps of my students' lives. Aren't they wonderful?" she answered. My mind instantly began adapting the lesson to my purpose.

As a creative autobiography project, I decided to ask my students to design maps of their lives showing the major events thus far and the lessons, or growth, that resulted. I planned to ask each student to construct his or her map on a full sheet of poster board, just as I had seen in Mrs. Palmer's room. The first class day began a little roughly. I completely explained the assignment and then enthusiastically instructed the students to "Go to it!" Expecting to hear the sounds of frenzied writing, snipping, drawing, and other creative activities, I was deflated to hear dead silence. The students looked at me uncomfortably.

"Is there a problem?" I asked.

"Nothing exciting has ever happened to me," pro-

tested one student.

"I can't think of any major events in my life," added another.

Immediately seeing the problem, I picked up a piece of chalk and headed for the chalkboard.

"Let's brainstorm some ideas together! Well, let's see, a major event in my life was the birth of my baby sister," I began.

"Oh, yeah! I have two little brothers!"

"I have a brand-new nephew!" Students began writing.

"Another major event in my life was getting my first job," I continued. "How many of you have ever had a job?" Hands shot up around the room. More students began to write. "And then there was the day I got my driver's license," I said as I wrote on the board. Suddenly, there was a flood of responses, so many I could hardly keep up. They were on their way now. Students had illustrated such events as a divorce, the death of a friend or relative, misbehavior and its consequences, the first day of school, a trip to the dentist's office, family vacations, moving, first kisses,

and so on. The second and third days were spent constructing maps. On the fourth day, students hung the maps around the room and then presented and explained their maps. The results were wonderful. I was thrilled to see the creativity of my students emerge. One student drew all of the different states she had lived in, illustrating the major events that took place in each state. Another student used a coffee can to trace circles in different places on the poster board and illustrated her events within each circle, connecting them chronologically with a road. Still another student drew a geographical map of the small town where he grew up and enlarged the locations of major events. Whatever the techniques he or she chose, each student's final product resembled a map, and the events were linked together chronologically. Under each illustration, which might be a photograph, a magazine cutout, a drawing, or any kind of creative visual, there was a brief description of the event and the change or lesson it provided.

Remembering the tactile, visual, and creative success of this assignment, I applied this lesson to Scout and Jem in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. I asked the students to map the life of one of these characters in the same way. As in the autobiographical map, each student illustrated and wrote about at least ten events in chronological order. This required students to search their book and notes for details and to draw conclusions based on personal opinion, class discussions, and information provided in the book. Again, the results were wonderful. We hung on the walls dozens of posters presenting the lives of Jem and Scout and the lessons they learned through experience. For example, one student mapped the highlights of Scout's life, like meeting "Boo" at last, and included bubbles showing Scout's thoughts about each of these events. Several students who mapped Jem's life included the time Jem found the knife in the oak tree, but each one handled it differently. One student sketched a picture of Jem finding the knife, while another showed just the knife on a timeline that included other significant items like his mended pants and Mrs. Dubose's white camellia. This lesson worked so well at helping the students organize the events in a character's life that I have begun to adapt it to other pieces of literature such as *Macbeth*, *Julius Caesar*, *Lord of the Flies*, *Beowulf*, and *The Odyssey*. The possibilities are endless. Thanks, Mrs. Palmer!

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Use gts. key gts. to describe changes in char. January 1994