Kristin Sciacca

Shawsheen Valley Regional Technical High School

*Independent Reading Circle*: Curriculum Unit Plan

This is a unit I adapted from one originally designed by Christy McKee, an English teacher here at Shawsheen. I usually reserve it for fourth quarter with my American Literature college prep classes. Ideally, it is a four-week unit that culminates on the last day of classes before final exams. It might also work well in that tricky period between Thanksgiving and Christmas, or between February and April vacations, depending on how long that stretch works out to be. For me, it has accomplished several goals:

* It gives the students choice (or the illusion of choice) in selecting what they read.
* It encourages independent (yet guided) exploration of a text.
* It fosters collaborative learning among peers.
* It gives me the freedom to be a discussion partner rather than an instructor.
* It allows me to introduce texts that are high-interest but might otherwise be left out of the curriculum. I want them to enjoy reading these books.

I am always in the process of adding and removing titles from the list. This year I might add a Hemingway, Kathryn Stockett’s *The Help*, some classic science-fiction, or whatever else I feel might interest this year’s particular group of kids.

Some things to note: This unit was designed for a vocational school. Our students meet for nine forty-minutes periods (usually twice a day) during their academic weeks and then disappear into their shops for a week. The **Unit Calendar** reflects this schedule and allows for plenty of independent reading time during “Shop Week.” In a traditional high school, the calendar may need to be adjusted to accommodate single class meetings, block scheduling, and shorter weekend reading assignments.

PROCESS

Day one/Introducing the unit

On the first day of the unit, I lay out the stacks of books on a table and explain only that they will be selecting their own books and working independently. There are only enough copies of each title to prevent the eventual groups from being too large. For example, in a class of 22 students, I will make 4 copies of 6 titles available, so no group will be larger than 4 or smaller than 2.

Then, I hand out the **Reading Assignments** sheet so they can read the synopses and get an idea of what the reading load for each title will be. Then I let them pick their books. I try to guide them as they choose only so far as to try to prevent what I think will be a disaster, but ultimately, the choice is theirs.

Next, I reveal that they have just formed *Reading Circles*, or groups, that they will be working with for the next four weeks. I prefer to have the groups form this way, organically based on interest, rather than to allow them to form groups first. They are sometimes annoyed, but this method makes it more likely that the students will actually enjoy the book. There are valid reasons for allowing them to select their circle before the book, though.

Finally, I hand out the **Calendar** and **Guidelines**, and review both. Initially they are overwhelmed by the number and scope of the tasks, but the calendar helps alleviate the anxiety. I explain what each component of the portfolio is and that I will be there to guide them as they work through the project. It is also important to explain that they will complete some assignments independently and some as a group, but that each student will be required to have a copy of all group work in his or her portfolio.

In our second class meeting that day, students receive the **Table of Contents/Checklist**, which will eventually become the first page of their portfolios, and complete the **Rationale** worksheet, which asks them to reflect on their choice and anticipate the process.

Days two – four

Students follow the schedule laid out in the **Calendar.** Unless otherwise noted, reading and work periods are quiet times for independent work. Group work is scheduled so that everyone is noisy at once. Computer lab time is scheduled for students to begin typing their work, but some students have typed at home. These periods are usually considered “group work” time, and are active and noisy. During this unit, I encourage students to bring in cushions or lap desks, to sit on the floor, to spread out – in general, to try to be as comfortable as possible as they read. I will often book time in the library, with its comfortable seating, or switch classrooms with a colleague who has tables rather than desks. I am trying to change up the scenery and facilitate enjoyable reading and/or group work conditions.

During independent work periods, I am available to meet with individual students on an as-needed basis. During group work periods, I circulate to encourage text-based discussion and effective division of labor. I use this time to make sure they are working as a group to come to an understanding of the text, but I try to remain flexible. It’s important for me to remember that their aim in reading the text might differ from what my aim in teaching the text might have been. They may not care about what I would care about, but as long as they are working towards thematic meaning, the discrepancy is part of the joy.

Day five

This is the last day of the week. They have a reading check assigned for this day. This basic reading comprehension quiz is intended to hold them responsible for meeting small deadlines. I include this as a safety to make sure that the groups stay on track and to help prevent the often inevitable slacker from weighing down the group. The grades on these quizzes are counted separately as part of their regular term grades in addition to being included in their final portfolio. I have created two quizzes for each title, and the final quiz is the same for each title.

End of Unit

At the end of the unit, I give the students some time in class and the computer labs to print out all their work and put it all together into a portfolio. I find it hard to require them to work together outside of school, so this time becomes necessary. Over the course of the year, I have already set the kids up with Google Docs, so they can share their group work that way. I also find it helpful to recommend lightening one group member’s workload so that he or she can be responsible for collecting and formatting all the group work. This sounds superfluous, but often helps play to one student’s strengths or cover for another’s weakness. A student with executive function limitations, for example, would find this aspect of the project particularly overwhelming.

Over the course of the unit, I remind students of the points available for “**Extra Creativity.”** Perhaps they illustrate the cover of their portfolio, design something special for dividers, construct their own book instead of using a binder. There are limitless options here, which is, of course, the point.

On the final day of the unit, students will submit their portfolios and present their **Creative Interpretation of Theme** project. As I say in the guidelines, this is a project that illustrates an understanding of theme without being text-based. The intent is for them to identify a significant theme in the text and create an original metaphor to express that theme. Then, they craft a project to illustrate that metaphor without using words. Earlier in the unit, they will have filled out a the **Project Proposal Worksheet.** This helps them break down the complex nature of the project into manageable parts. On the last day of class, I move all the desks to the center of my room, clear the walls and the white boards, and bring in cheese and crackers. Students come in to the room before and during homeroom and arrange their projects on the walls or on the desks to create an exhibit. Then, during class, we have a gallery tour. The students stand, moving about with plates of cheese and crackers, and listen as classmates present their projects as the artists in this gallery. I always invite other teachers and administrators to join us, though they rarely do. This “gallery” approach increases the quality of the work produced. Knowing there will be an audience, even if it is a familiar one, seems to put just enough pressure on the students to create some beautiful work. In the past, projects have included metal sculpture, paintings, dioramas, cakes, and even a song and dance number. This is a great way to spend the last day of class.

ASSESSMENT

I use the **TOC/Checklist** as a rubric to guide my summative assessment. This makes it a relatively simple task, especially since I have been conducting formative assessments throughout the unit with the quizzes and with my daily conversations with the groups and individuals.