

Poster Project

“You know, Ms. McKnight, those Russian serfs are no different from the homeless people who live under the train tracks two blocks from here.”

-Urban city student comment about Russians after the Poster Project activity, prior to reading Russian author Chekhov’s *The Cherry Orchard*

On the first day that Katie’s seniors were to read *The Cherry Orchard* by Chekhov, she invited them to respond to the following prompt in their journals:

- Think of a time when something in your life changed.
- How did you handle the life change?
- Did you try to go back to “the way things used to be,” or did you accept the change with little struggle? (Some life changes could include moving to a new home, changing schools, an addition to the family, a loss to your family.)

Katie thought that journal writing would support the students’ comprehension, as it had done on other occasions. Her students’ responses to the journal prompts supported her supposition that they comprehended the major theme of the play; however, as they began reading the play, many students lay their heads on their desks. The faces of other students displayed extreme frustration and a lack of interest. “OK, what gives?” Katie asked them. “Why the glum faces?” “Well, Ms. McKnight, this play is boring. Nothing about it makes sense!” they said. Katie told them not to worry and that it would make sense to them later, so she pushed through the scene.

Self-Reflection

What actions and reactions do your students demonstrate that let you know they are not relating to the material?

As they continued to read scene 1, the students kept interrupting the reading of the scene, asking Katie who this king was or who this member of the Russian royal family was. They also asked about what the conflicts were that Chekhov was referring to. As they were nearing the end of the initial scene in *The Cherry Orchard*, it dawned on Katie where her students’ disconnect was coming from. Not only did they know nothing about Russian royalty and the conflicts that gave rise to the revolution of 1917, they had no clue about Russian history in general. Her goal, through the pre-reading strategy of journal writing, was to introduce Chekhov’s major theme of the play. Katie realized that although journal writing had introduced the theme of the play, her senior students would not be able to connect with this particular text world if she did not provide them with the opportunity to get some background in Russian history. Katie went home that night feeling like a failure as a teacher. She had made the very assumption that she had tried for years to avoid as a teacher: don’t assume anything. Katie needed to regroup. She found a potential solution when she recalled a pre-reading activity that she had used successfully in a similar situation—when she taught Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* to a class of sophomores. As was the case with the students studying Chekhov, From Katherine S. McKnight and Bradley Berlage, *Teaching the Literature Classics in the Inclusive Classroom: Reader Response Activities to Engage All Learners*. Copyright © 2007 by Jossey-Bass. Reprinted by permission of Jossey-Bass.

this class had possessed a limited historical knowledge of the “Roaring Twenties”— the setting and context of Fitzgerald’s novel. The Poster Project that we outline in the upcoming pages provided the opportunity to build students’ schema prior to reading the novel. Students chose to create posters that described various topics from the 1920s, such as prohibition, gangsters, clothes, flappers, and cars. By providing students with the opportunity to choose their own topic surrounding this time period, she gave them the opportunity to develop a personal connection with the subject matter, making the reading of this material from the 1920s relevant to their current lives. Katie took this activity and applied it to the Chekhov novel. The assignment shown in Exhibit 2.2 was distributed to seniors on the second day of the course. Exhibit 2.3 presents a student review form, and Exhibit 2.4 shows the rubric for the assignment. What happened? Once her seniors received approval from their crabby editor (Katie), they spent one week researching and preparing their feature article presentations. For each student, the class became the “editorial review board”; they discussed the proposals and what the posters revealed about Russian society at this time. The students responded to this assignment with interest because everyone had a different topic assignment, and the writing-research partners selected the topic they wished to explore and present. The class created posters on a wide variety of topics that included

- Cosmetics
- Clothing
- Cars
- Living environments
- The Moscow subway system
- Royal palaces
- The royal family
- Food
- Famous musicians
- Religion

Through the pre-reading poster presentations, Katie’s class

- Explored the difference between the social classes in Chekhov’s Russia and the United States
- Was amazed by the Moscow subway and shocked to learn the number of Russian soldiers who perished during World War I
- Celebrated the beauty of Russian ballet and Tchaikovsky’s music

When the students were done with the presentations, the response was more positive than it had been prior to the activity. After completing the Poster Project, Katie decorated the walls of the classroom with the visually enticing posters that the students had created, then continued with their reading of Chekhov’s *The Cherry Orchard*. “Oh!” her class jokester, Fumi, declared, “I get the stuff that was going on at the time!” As the students continued reading the scenes, Katie took a step back and observed her students. A week after the Russian history blitz, the students

were more attentive when they read certain scenes aloud in class and were not asking as many questions about the plot as prior to the poster activity. Katie asked students to write about

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their experience in their journals. “I never knew about all of this,” reflected one student, named Terrence. Tanisha, one of the outspoken seniors, wrote this in her journal: I HATED this play ’cuz it was soooooo boring. But when we did the article thing, I learned more about the people and that makes the play more interesting. I still don’t like the play as much as some other stuff that we’ve read but it’s not so bad. Tanisha’s honest and insightful reaction helped confirm what Katie had learned through observation. The honesty in student journals can be very helpful in defining which teaching strategies are working for specific students and which strategies are not.

Through this pre-reading activity, Katie provided her students the opportunity to develop a personal connection with this time period in Russian history. As a result, the students were able to build their schema on Russian history prior to reading; they could then enter Chekhov’s story world in *The Cherry Orchard* equipped with background information. This pre-reading strategy also helped the students brush up on their research, writing, and oral presentation skills. Through the Poster Project, the students built a bridge between their contemporary lives and a seemingly long-ago time, and discovered numerous connections between their world and Chekhov’s. Monisha’s comments summed up the connections they had made using this poster pre-reading activity: Just like us, people are left out. . . . People are discriminated against and trying to figure out how to have a good life. People are dealing with that now.

Exhibit 2.2 Sample Poster Project Lesson

Assignment Poster Project for Chekov’s World Background Congratulations! You are an important feature writer for *Visions of History* magazine. Your crabby editor is on deadline and has demanded that you write a feature article on Russia during Anton Chekhov’s time. She wants topics that are interesting for the reader, and they must be researched. Even though your editor is demanding, you’re ready for the challenge and immediately go back to your writing and research partner to brainstorm topics that would be of interest to the magazine’s readers. (Apparently, the crabby editor is offering bonuses for outstanding articles.)

Possible Topics

Some of the brainstormed topics include:

Music: Performers and trends

Art: Influential artists and important trends in the art world

What life is like for the average Russian living in Moscow (or other big Russian city) prior to the historic Russian Revolution of 1917

Kinds of transportation that exist today (how the average Russian “gets around” (There are dozens more that the writing team can present.)

Once you and your writing-research partner have approval from the editor, please research the topic and prepare a poster to present at the editor’s meeting. The poster should contain pictures and text showing the teacher and the editorial staff that this is a worthy topic for a feature article in the next issue.

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Deadline [insert date]

Exhibit 2.3 Student Review Form

Poster Presenters Poster Topics

Assessment Criteria Yes/No

This presentation was well researched.

I learned a lot from reviewing the poster.

The poster was presented in an interesting manner.

The poster presentation was neat and orderly.

Exhibit 2.4 Rubric for Poster Project

Exceeds standards

My/our poster contained pictures and text that were approved by my teacher.

My poster contained at least 6 to 8 entries and was arranged in a neat, easy-to-follow format.

The topics on my poster were obviously researched.

Meets standards

The topic of my/our poster contained pictures and text that were approved by my teacher.

My poster contained at least 6 to 8 entries arranged in a neat, easy-to-follow format.

Does not meet standards

The topic of my poster was not approved by my teacher.

A Power Project Lesson Plan is shown in Exhibit 2.5.

Guidelines for Creating an Effective Poster

Pre-Reading Activity

When creating inquiry questions for canonical text, try to create prompts that

- Are thought provoking
- Encourage students to use metacognitive strategies
- Tie in the themes of the canonical literature with personal reflection

Guidelines for Follow-Up Discussion to the Poster Project

- Ask first for general responses.
- Avoid sharing your opinion; we need to get the kids thinking.
- Focus on the students' opinions.
- Repeat what the students say to validate their reactions and elicit further reflection.

Exhibit 2.5 Poster Project Lesson Plan

Pre-Reading

Mini-Lesson

Poster Project

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Objective In order to build on schema for the canonical literature they are studying, have students create a poster that relates to the time and location of the author's origin.

Materials Poster board

Magazines

Scissors

Markers

Glue sticks

Access to the library or Internet

Example Author: Anton Chekhov

Work: The Cherry Orchard

Assignment: Have students create a poster researching information on Russia during Anton Chekhov's time.

Topics might include

Music: Performers and trends

Art: Influential artists and trends in the art world

Lifestyle: What life was like for the average Russian

Transportation

Time: 1 week

Procedure

Step 1 Present the assignment in the form of a request from an editor (see Exhibit 2.2).

Step 2 Students may work individually or choose a partner.

Step 3 After four days of research and preparation, students must present their poster to the class.

Step 4 This information is then compiled onto a document and circulated to all students.

IRA/NCTE

Standards

7. Students conduct research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions, and by posing problems. They gather, evaluate, and synthesize data from a variety of sources (e.g., print and nonprint texts, artifacts, people) to communicate their discoveries in ways that suit their purpose and audience.

8. Students use a variety of technological and information resources (e.g., libraries, databases, computer networks, video) to gather and synthesize information and to create and communicate knowledge.