

# Stations of ChaoCity

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## Experiential exercise in expanding concept of literacy among adolescents

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Ninth grade students who previously resisted teacher-originated activity cycle through various learning stations that represent categories of alternative literacy. They are presented with familiar colloquial forms of expression, and presented with challenge cards designed to foster engagement and thoughtful consideration. They will provide feedback regarding interest level and engagement through activities. Students will be observed for evidence of change in level of communication with the teacher, engagement with teacher-prompted activity and behavioral affect. Implications for future teacher steps toward open communication and academic interaction with this demographic are discussed.

**Background:**

The high school English teacher requested Reading Specialist support based on concerns that these students as a collective are typically disengaged from any level of academic discussion regarding literacy of any form. They participate in the “hook” portion of a lesson, but immediately and decisively shut down upon shifting into academic discourse, activity, or intent. Their behavioral affect is that of students entirely “checked out of” the English classroom, replete with behaviors ranging from passive nonparticipation (e.g. sleeping) to active disregard (e.g. talking out of turn, speaking with classmates) to aggressive avoidance (e.g. purposefully turning to hurtful, inappropriate language and discussion in an effort to be removed from the room).

The class is a “C-level” ninth grade English course in one of the largest high schools in the state. This designation implies that the students are expected to be on a vocational, non-college preparatory track. This is the third of four levels of hierarchy, with the fourth being a Special Education track and the first being Honor’s level. At 3,400 students, the size of the school itself suggests that the class demographic is fairly homogeneous in composition.

Since these students are in the first semester of their first year at high school, and have come to the school from three other sending towns, the social impact on their education must be considered. “Like all other forms of communication, reading is nothing if not social,” (Freebody and Freiberg, 2001 p 10) and that social dynamic is one that could be tapped. Any group’s literary identity is wrapped closely with its social character. Freebody and Frieberg go on to suggest that reading is an “open-textured concept, covering many diverse social activities in the world” (Freebody and Frieberg, 2001 p 10) and it is from the social identity of this class that the specialist gathered ideas of what to include in literacy based stations.

## Rationale:

- Upon inquiry, the specialist verified that District testing and student records indicate that the students are appropriately placed at the C-level. Recent legislation dictates that these are freshman students looking forward to mandatory enrollment through age 18; the school needs to explore ways to bring these students “back to the table” before they are turned off entirely.
- Several academic modifications proved unsuccessful with this particular class, and this is not an atypical chemistry to manifest in a school this size, nor at the C level. This study explores the response of this demographic to experiential literacy, and the potential for its use in future curriculum with other classes of similar make up.
- Guiding philosophy for the study is based on Goldberg’s work: *Seven Principles of Multicultural Education and the Arts* (in this case, diverse culture is defined by demographics):
  1. *The arts expand expressive outlets and provide a range of learning styles available to students*
  2. *The arts enable a freedom of expression for students*
  3. *The arts provide a stage for building self-esteem*
  4. *The arts encourage collaboration and intergroup harmony*
  5. *The arts empower students and teachers.*
  6. *The arts deepen teacher awareness of children’s abilities and provide alternative methods of assessment.*
  7. *The arts provide authentic cultural voices and add complexity to teaching and learning.*

(Goldberg, 2000)

**Purpose: Qualitative data collection relative to this particular demographic.**

- Determine at what level this demographic is willing to engage.
- Determine frequency of participation and stamina of students at various stations.
- Rate level of intellectual engagement compared to type of activity presented.
- Explore qualitatively the students' expressed interests and abilities.
- Extrapolate future guided activities to bridge to curriculum (practical implementation potential for future years with classes of similar chemistry and composition).

**Method:**

Seven separate stations are located around the room. Each is placed so that the teams have as much physical space as is practical for both activity and sound. General directions are projected on the board via an LCD projector, although this is not necessary. The directions could just as easily be written on the white board. At each station, students find a collection of materials, as described in Table 1. Accompanying each station is a Challenge Card. Each card is tailored to the station, and is worded to provoke thought and action from students as they manipulate the various activity materials. Wording of these cards can also be found in Table 1.

- Students will be given one minute to decide which of the seven stations will be their first. Students are encouraged to walk around to see all stations before making their decision.
- Students will be invited to participate in ten minute intervals at a station of their choosing. Only four students per station are allowed meaning some stations could be empty at any given point in time.
- Students may stay at a station for more than “one turn” but they must remain effective, and at least one person must be “voted off” each round. (i.e. four students cannot stay at the same station the whole time).

- Debriefing will include a class-end discussion of what worked (and what didn't) about this exercise.
- Process oriented questions will include (and not be limited to):
  - How did this class session “feel” compared with typical class sessions?
  - Three people share their favorite station (no repeats).
  - If we did this again, which stations would you be willing to do something a little bit academic with?

**The Stations:**

Station Contents	Challenge Card Text	Station Rationale
<p><i>Music – practical acoustical.</i></p> <p><b>Includes:</b> a guitar, two “Diddly-Bo” single-string handmade guitars, pencils with large erasers (for percussion) and other potential instruments (bells, chimes, etc.) Sheet music, chord cheat-sheet, and beginner books provided as well.</p>	<p>Try to figure out how to play a song that is recognizable, on the Diddly-Bo.</p>	<p>Musical literacy, for any level can be explored. Pushing even an expert to try playing on an instrument they are HIGHLY unlikely to have played before (the Diddly-bo) expands thoughts on the instrument, and the idea of being a “beginner” again.</p>
<p><i>Print Literature - relevant higher interest</i></p> <p><b>Includes:</b> magazines (skiing, NASCAR, Sports Illustrated [censored] and other similar magazines. Also: printed stories by teens from such websites as TeenInk, Merlyn’s Pen.org and others.</p>	<p>Settle into one or two of these magazines and... enjoy!</p>	<p>Give students the chance to explore something they’re interested in without boundaries, limits, academic purpose. Enjoyment is a primary key to motivation. This station is one that students can be nudged from (they may move on independently as other stations open up).</p>
<p><i>Constructive communication – unbound production task.</i></p> <p><b>Includes:</b> writing implements, art supplies, paper of different sorts and textures, “toys” to build with and create with. Puppets used to play out stories.</p>	<p>What can you build?            What story can you tell?            What can you create from nothingness?</p>	<p>What are these students willing to do? If given the opportunity, can they create a story at the elemental level, and does it contain components we would expect to see even in an oral traditional culture? Watch for if answers to these questions present in student engagement in this station.</p>

Station Contents	Challenge Card Text	Station Rationale
<p><i>Foileeys – artifact driven commentary</i></p> <p><b>Includes:</b> Tin foil character as a model, sheets of tin foil to make their own per the Challenge Card. Stapler and index cards to make statues stand up.</p>	<p>Create a Foileey that represents you. Try to communicate something specific (interests, favorite activity). Title your Foileey to help others understand what you're trying to represent.</p>	<p>Experience alternative mode of communicating. Engage students in discussion of supporting details (why did you make the face of your Foileey look downwards – is it sad, or angry? Why?)</p>
<p><i>Lyrics – think about your own art.</i></p> <p><b>Includes:</b> lyrics (censored for appropriate language and content)</p>	<p>Try to sing one of these songs – without the music available! What's this song about, anyway?</p>	<p>Get students to focus on the words of their music, see if they notice the language of the song itself. Is there a different message when reading vs listening to the score and lyrics together?</p>
<p><i>Books – print, bound text – higher interest.</i></p> <p><b>Includes:</b> Ripley's Believe it or not, Uncle John's Bathroom Reader, etc.</p>	<p>What's interesting about this stuff? Why do some people think this is cool?</p>	<p>Gore, strangeness, and non-standard content draw adolescents. Challenge in facilitating will be to get them to read the captions as well as notice the crazy images.</p>
<p><i>Voice recorder – mimicking the sounds of the world around us.</i></p> <p>Will include a handheld voice recorder and several cards with various challenge phrases on them. Students will try to make the sounds listed on the cards, record on the recorder, and play with the sound.</p>	<p>Make and record the sound of a... Train, elephant, car horn, siren, race boat, NASCAR final lap, touchdown, water balloon landing, sprinkler, TV static. Can someone else listen to your recording and guess what your sound was?</p>	<p>Effective sound production, attention to what other people need to hear in order to understand your intent. Give students the opportunity to play with sounds, experience immediacy of audience interaction/reaction. Hear sound of own vocal production.</p>

**Student reaction to the activity session:**

“What worked (and what didn’t) about this exercise – what did you like?”

We actually had fun.

No rules made it great – we didn’t get in trouble.

“How did this class session ‘feel’ compared with typical class sessions?”

It was interesting for once.

We got to do different things, without rules.

“Three people share their favorite station (no repeats).”

Guitar (just to have fun with, and make up songs for)

Diddly-Bo (it was fun trying to figure it out)

Recorder (we got to say things we’re not supposed to)

“If we did this again, which stations would you be willing to do something a little bit more academic with?”

Drawing (we did do something for Romeo and Juliet!)

Foileys (pointed again to back of room to scene made of Juliet bowing before her father)

Music (but not Country music!)



**Stations in practice – one 45 minute period. Reflection and Commentary**

Station Contents	Teacher and Specialist Reflection	Relevant Future Extensions
<p><i>Music- physical acoustical</i></p> <p><b>Includes:</b> a guitar, two “Diddly-Bo” single-string guitars, pencils with large erasers (for percussion) and other potential instruments (bells, chimes, etc.). Sheet music, chord cheat-sheet, and beginner books provided as well.</p>	<p>Mostly male students responded to this station. Few left it willingly. Students appeared equally intrigued by the Diddly-Bo as by the guitar. Students accepted the challenge to try to play a familiar song on the single-string, but few went through the motions of trying to make specific notes. Most tried strumming “chords” and singing along. They expressed sincere curiosity about how make it work, and how to get volume out of it.</p>	<p>Even non-musical students were drawn to the instruments. Some used lyrics of made-up songs to tease with others, but overall as students played the instruments they focused in on the instrument, and worked to understand it within their capabilities.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have students write songs to perform regarding reading content or theme.</li> <li>• Develop a score of music to represent a character (like Jaws)</li> </ul>
<p><i>Print Literature – relevant higher interest.</i></p> <p><b>Includes:</b> magazines (skiing, NASCAR, Sports Illustrated [censored] and other similar magazines)</p>	<p>One young lady was disappointed that the activity did not include any “girl magazines.” (an accidental omission)</p> <p>Several students were interested, but once more auditory stations came alive, students meandered away.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maybe provide some teen magazines for students to review when they first arrive, as settlers. Several students gravitated toward the box with magazines as they filtered into the classroom. Replenishing/rotating the magazines could keep interest up.</li> <li>• Class ‘Zine?</li> </ul>
<p><i>Constructive communication – unbound production task</i></p> <p><b>Includes:</b> writing implements, art supplies, paper of different sorts and textures, “toys” to build with and create with. Puppets to play out stories with.</p>	<p>This station drew female students until after class had been prompted to switch twice. Males exhausted the auditory stations first, and then moved on to the visual arts. While students started with traditional drawing, marking, chalking, and cut-and-pasting, they did move on to origami, paper airplanes, and other three dimensional art. One student made a chalk glove to draw with.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Allow students a few minutes after reading to draw, illustrate, or even scribble-draw about what they have read, before discussing. Let them edit or add to their drawing after discussing. The drawing can become a guide from which to launch discussion.</li> <li>• Illustrated dictionaries, character guides, comic strip plot reminders.</li> </ul>

Station Contents	Teacher and Specialist Reflection	Relevant Future Extensions
<p><i>Foileeys – artifact driven commentary.</i></p> <p><b>Includes:</b> tin foil character as a model, sheets of tin foil to make a self-representative model of. Stapler and index cards to make statues stand up.</p>	<p>Students moved quickly from making the little tinfoil people into making costumes and props. They made several props: Iron Man, Iron Fist, Ice Cream Man, and a few other superheroes amongst us! Students made sunglasses, masks, and implements. Two young ladies made intricate roses, with stems, thorns, and finely petaled buds!</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recreate a scene with multiple Foileeys</li> <li>• Appraise student understanding of character relations through puppeting with the Foileeys.</li> <li>• Ice breaker at beginning of year – “Make a Foileey of yourself and introduce us to him/her”</li> <li>• Make implement for a specific character (one likely to use)</li> </ul>
<p><i>Lyrics – think about your own art.</i></p>	<p>No students explored this station at all.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hmm...</li> </ul>
<p><i>Books – print, bound text – higher interest.</i></p> <p><b>Includes:</b> Ripley’s, Uncle John’s Bathroom Reader, etc.</p>	<p>Several students were initially drawn to this station, though later lured away by the louder and more interactive stations. They focused closely on the graphic details and macro-content of the books, few necessarily read the text involved in describing or explaining the images. Male and female students showed interest, and students stayed with the station until prompted to move on.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide graphic novels for enrichment of content (not replacement of!)</li> <li>• Have students generate own graphic short stories to reinforce theme, content, connections</li> </ul>
<p><i>Voice recorder – mimicking the sounds of the world around us.</i></p> <p>Will include a handheld voice recorder and several cards with various challenge phrases on them. Students will try to make the sounds listed on the cards, record on the recorder, and play with the sound.</p>	<p>Almost everyone cycled through this station at one point or another. This became a private place to be a bit naughty; care should be taken with this activity in the future, and certainly take none of the file contents seriously. It seemed to be a release for some of the students, and some definitely took advantage of the opportunity for inappropriate language. They deflated immediately when told the teacher wasn’t even going to listen, just delete them without hearing their messages, suggesting they were trying to “get a rise” out of the teacher.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• hmm...</li> <li>• monologue the character might say in a certain situation</li> <li>• Hear one’s self read aloud to work toward fluency with challenging sentence structure</li> <li>• Read Shakespeare aloud, play back for private hearing of clarity and meaning</li> </ul>

## Discussion:

These students were more engaged, enthusiastic, and interested in classroom activities than the teacher witnessed any time over the term. One boy, characterized as a “frequent flyer” in the Department Head’s office, approached the teacher at the end of class, looked her in the eyes and sincerely said, “Thank you, Ms. G\*\*\*\*” before he left. Students chatted with, spoke with, and were respectful to both the teacher and the specialist – engaging them at a level well above their typical affect as teacher and specialist circulated among the respective stations. Prior to this, the teacher had reported that students virtually ignored her during transition into and out of the classroom. Only repeated exposure could tell how transformative an experiential teaching practice such as this might be on this demographic’s classroom performance and behavior. The results of this pilot study do indicate that teacher flexibility in recognizing the student’s literacy in alternative forms can “make or break” the impact of literacy instruction on resistant or struggling students.

Teacher flexibility at the secondary level is a natural extension of what Cole refers to as the “literary personality” when discussing case study results based on exploring the reading-based behaviors of second graders. Though Cole’s study centered on second grade students, her implications for classroom awareness of literacy are no less alien to the high school English class with a literature component. Cole indicated that:

- It is crucial to offer students a rich, literate environment in the classroom...
- A wide variety of reading experiences can foster engaged reading...
- Students’ voices are so important; many opportunities for them to express their opinions should be part of the fabric of the classroom culture...
- Arranging opportunities for students to engage in social interactions is necessary... (Cole, 2003, p335)

When students lack awareness of the richness of their own literacy, or fail to bring their literacy to bear in an academic setting, the teacher can bridge this deficit through carefully choreographed experiences that activate student interest, engagement, and affect. If the teacher is aware of the

students' literacy, then the teacher can use that literacy to scaffold across to academic discourse. "Being aware of the differences between students and honoring their literacy personalities..." enables the teacher to "...provide a learning environment that endeavors to meet each student's needs and capitalize on his or her interests" (Cole, 2003, p330).

Experience suggests some students in the first year of high school do still need direct instruction and guided practice in self-regulation; this identifying characteristic is more prevalent in classes such as the one in this study. In the interest of building their concept of classroom engagement, behavior, and academic discourse, these sorts of activities would prove advantageous. These particular students reacted strongly and positively to the dramatic influence of infused arts, and inclusion of exercises in this area could prove beneficial to other students' experience in and appreciation of high school English. Struggling ninth graders do not transfer interest as readily as grade-level peers, frequently due to prior frustration in academic interactions; teacher sensitivity to this dynamic can be a formative experience.

In the interest of authentic, rigorous education, with real-world connections student engagement should be first and foremost on the teacher's agenda. Students feel that "school is first of all a social event. They need to feel that they belong, have friends, and are liked by the teacher" (Gaskins, 2003, pg 150). It was evident from the way students entered the classroom and actively undermined the learning environment that they did not feel positive about the social interactions presented. One way to bridge the gap between student interest, student motivation, and curriculum requirements, is to engage students from within their own expressed literacy. Helping students recognize alternative expressed literacy involves teaching them to explore their own world from their own perspective and apply academic discourse to something familiar. Concrete scaffolding through activities such as those discussed in this study can benefit the loosely engaged student and improve their self-concept as a literate student.

## Works Cited

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