

The Mockingbird Essay: A Case of Unclear Expectations

I. Introduction: The Context of Instruction

Throughout our study of Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, my students were curious about the title. After reading a few chapters without finding any clues, several students demanded an explanation: What does this title have to do with the book? I insisted on their patience. Solving the mystery—that is, discovering the possible meanings of the novel's title—was part of their learning. I intended to teach my students how to interpret literature in a deep and meaningful way. My goal was to have them express their interpretations in writing, and I felt that recognizing the title's thematic significance was key to a final interpretation of the novel. Not that this interpretation would end their thinking about the book, but I thought the title provided an opportunity for my students to look back at the novel as a whole, collect facts, and write an essay that showed mastery of the skills and concepts we had been working on throughout the year.

The class had written three interpretive essays up to this point, two of which were in-class essays. Those who had been keeping up knew, or at least recognized, the nuts and bolts of essay writing. We had worked extensively on how to create a thesis statement and how to support it by breaking it into smaller claims with evidence. I knew many students would still have problems with the essay format—students who did not get it the first, or second, or third time through. With the writing skills involved in crafting an essay a given problem for me to scaffold around, I spent time before the essay working on concepts: activities on interpretation of the novel (and the novel's title).

During the weeks leading up to the culminating essay, various activities prepared students to make sense of the title. First, there was Atticus's decree: "It's a sin to kill a mockingbird"; then Miss Maudie tried to explain Atticus's statement to the kids. Both of these parental figures gave the children, the novel's narrator Scout being one of them, something to consider. We analyzed these passages in class, but the rest of the book would be the source of the fullest explanations. When we were nearly halfway through the book—and well past the part where Atticus mentions the mockingbird—my students forgot about the novel's title for a while.

II. More Context: The Students and the School

Before I tell my story—how the title became important again, how I had students write an essay that tackled questions around it, and how I received a batch of essays that didn't meet my expectations—I should say a few things about my students and my school. I teach a 10th grade English class at San Modrin High School, a school in a diverse working-class town in the San Francisco Bay Area. The school is not tracked, but there are sheltered classes for English Language Learners and some Advanced Placement classes for juniors and seniors. My class is not sheltered or A.P., but I have students coming from the former and heading toward the latter. There is a diverse range of abilities and backgrounds in my

32?student class. It is fair to say that the class, like the rest of the school, has a very heterogeneous population. Although it is difficult to generalize about such a varied group of students, I can say that the classroom culture is affected by the majority's lack of academic motivation. The completion of homework, for instance, is a problem for most my students—a problem that all the teachers in my school must consider in their planning. By the time we were studying *To Kill a Mockingbird*, I had adjusted my planning to this aspect of the classroom culture. And my students' lack of homogeneity is relevant to my case only so far as readers understand that the variety of skill levels in my class demands I scaffold often and thoroughly. Had I really considered this fact, I might have avoided the confusion I describe below.

III. The Essay: Introduction, Preparation, and Writing

In preparing my students for the essay that would complete the unit of study, I had a variety of learning exercises to accommodate the diversity of learning styles in the classroom. The class spent a week doing a groupwork project on the trial of Tom Robinson, an innocent black man accused of raping a white woman (he is finally convicted and killed). They did individual detective work (a passage analysis assignment) to make sense of the mysterious incident in which Boo Radley kills Bob Ewell, the novel's most villainous character. All of these activities were designed to encourage my students to think about and discuss specific ideas. By the end of the book, students had thought about the following questions, in one form or another: Why does Atticus work his hardest on a trial he's convinced he has no chance of winning? Why is Tom Robinson convicted and eventually killed, and what does that say about justice? Why do Atticus and Sheriff Tate agree on lying to avoid putting Boo Radley through a trial?

All of these questions are related to Atticus's original utterance, "It's a sin to kill a mockingbird." The answers to the questions are complex and many. To take advantage of the chance for students to really consider questions like these in terms of a specific character, my Cooperating Teacher and I designed the *Mockingbird In?Class Interpretive Essay*. We began the essay prompt with a paragraph that gave the paper some context:

Atticus, Miss Maudie, and Mr. Underwood believe it is a sin to kill a mockingbird because this bird only makes beautiful music for us to enjoy and causes no harm. When the children receive air rifles for Christmas, Atticus reminds them that it would be dreadful to harm such a beautiful and innocent creature.

The prompt then asked students to write an essay in which they compare one of three characters—Atticus Finch, Boo Radley, or Tom Robinson—to a mockingbird. This essay, the fourth analytic essay of the year, seemed fairly straightforward. They would begin with an introduction that could include the background we provided (we considered this help with this introduction a way to scaffold them during the beginning of the essay). Then they were to end the introductory paragraph with a thesis statement. The thesis statement would be broken down into two or three claims, each with a paragraph. After these body paragraphs, the conclusion would sum up the argument and present a universal truth that

addresses what one can learn about justice by this comparison. I gave them “justice” to anchor their thematic conclusions. While I expected their conclusions to naturally find them thinking about justice, I wanted to be explicit about the general area in which their thinking and writing should lead.

My lesson first surprised me or, rather, put me in an awkward moment of realization soon after my CT and I handed out the essay prompt and organizers. As students worked on their thesis statements, we realized that something about the prompt was unclear. Up to that point, I had not thought much about how I expected students to compare their character to a mockingbird. I had sort of assumed it would be one that looked directly at how the mockingbird appears in the novel, but we hadn’t explicitly said so on the prompt. One could call it a moment of terror. As I walked around the room, I realized we had left out a direction that would immensely clarify the task. Students worked diligently as my CT and I quickly discussed the flaw in the assignment. We expected their comparison to be in terms of the statement “it’s a sin to kill a mockingbird.” I called the class to attention, and I told them to write the statement down on their prompts and to make sure their comparison considers it. While I thought the inclusion of the direction after the fact might get me a batch of confused papers, I was still hopeful that our adjustment had cleared things up.

The day of the in-class essay finally came. As I had told them before, they were allowed to use their notes and organizers. Walking around the room as they wrote their papers, I noticed only half of the class had finished their organizers. But people use them differently, I thought, knowing that some use them to take notes and others basically write their papers on the organizer. Nothing incredibly special happened the day the essay was written. Most people finished writing with time to spare. Curious about the results of the last ninety minutes of work, I put the papers away to take home and grade.

IV. Grading the Essay: The Reality of Confusion

Soon after I began grading, I realized I wasn’t pleased with the results. Only a few students had really taken advantage of the opportunity to consider this notion of a character as a mockingbird the way I had wanted them to. In fact, one of those few papers was powerful enough to teach me something profound I had never considered about the metaphor. However, the vast majority of the papers did not take on the task the way I hoped they would.

The most common problem with the papers was that the students didn’t spend any time discussing the mockingbird. One student, for example, never took the mockingbird beyond the first sentence in a paragraph. Her sentences began like the following one, which I’ve taken directly out of her essay: “Just like a mockingbird, Boo Radley shows his true colors through his kindheartedness.” The paragraph that followed the sentence simply proved that Boo Radley was kind—there was nothing about he mockingbird! Since this was one of my best students, and one of the strongest writers in the class, I knew I had made a mistake somewhere. Many of the other papers made this mistake: they would find

evidence to argue that a character had a quality that they perceived a mockingbird had, but they would often forget to write about the significance of this comparison. Therefore, many papers were spent trying to prove Tom Robinson's innocence, or Boo Radley's kindness, but the mockingbird had little to do with their argument. With so many problematic papers, I figured I needed to do some thinking about my lessons around the crafting of these papers. Where did I go wrong? What problems did I create that I could have avoided?

To grade the essay, I assigned each section (thesis, evidence, universal truth, etc.) a certain number of points and deducted points when the section was absent or lacked quality. Unfortunately, with pressure to get the essays graded, I assessed them without much adjustment or reflection about where I went wrong. Still, I was less critical than I would have been had I been confident about my task. The average grade for the essay was about the same as it usually was for essays.

V. Analysis: Re-considering the Essay

The most obvious problem was the lack of clarity in our essay prompt. While it was clear what I wanted students to do, it was not clear how I wanted them to go about it. As a class, we discussed the adjustment—to compare a character to a mockingbird in light of the phrase “it's a sin to kill a mockingbird”—the day the essay prompt was handed out, but it would have been best to have any alterations already on the hand?out to avoid confusing the students. While more advanced students might be able to infer that this context needed to be considered, better scaffolding would make it explicit in our directions. A later version of the prompt asked students to apply the statement “it's a sin to kill a mockingbird” to one of the three characters. This adjustment, along with a couple other questions that clarify the task (How is that character like a mockingbird, and how would deliberate harm done to that character be wrong?), makes my expectations clearer.

Beyond the clarity of the prompt, I've realized certain assumptions I made about student learning. In *The Process of Education*, Jerome Bruner discusses the notion of students' “readiness for learning.” In his chapter on readiness, he begins with the claim that “any subject can be taught effectively in some intellectually honest form to any child at any stage of development” (p.33). To take this claim seriously, I must ask myself—Were my students ready to complete the task I had assigned? Upon re-examination, I see that they were not. I asked my students to take on a complex task without the appropriate scaffolding or preparation to complete it well. While I had a few exceptions to this conclusion (a couple of students who did well in spite of the lack of scaffolding), thinking about where most of the learners in my class were—how ready they were—forces me to consider some missing points of my essay preparation.

Besides the standard structuring of an essay into a thesis, claims, and its other parts, the main task of the paper was a comparison. Most of the students in my class, I'm quite sure, had not written comparison papers before and had probably no formal instruction on how to compare. Perhaps comparison seems like a fairly straightforward process, but enough

students struggled with it to prove to me that it requires scaffolding. From the type of thinking it involves to the structuring of the essay, comparison requires a different process than the expository writing to which my students were accustomed. I could have scaffolded this process by showing my students different ways of organizing a comparison paper so that points of the comparison are not lost or confusing. I also could have provided them with examples of papers that make a comparison.

Much of how I expected students to talk about their comparisons was lacking in my scaffolding. While a critical vocabulary and the concepts around each term are not absolutely necessary for success in writing the paper, they make it easier for students to articulate the kind of comparison I expected in their papers. I expected, unfairly, my students to transfer understanding for which I had not taught. In *How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience, and School*, Bransford, Brown, and Cocking point out that “transfer is affected by the degree to which people learn with understanding rather than memorize a set facts” (Chapter 3). Not only had I forgotten to teach for understanding representation, I had not even introduced the different ways a thing can represent other things.

Before a teacher can expect his or her students to transfer complex thought about representation, he or she should provide opportunities for metacognition about representation. Metacognition about representation would be conscious thought about how some things represent other things. Bransford, Brown, and Cocking have found that the transfer of understanding can be improved by metacognition (Chapter 4). The challenge for me, then, is to find out what kinds of lesson would promote metacognition about representation. It seems clear to me now that the lesson would have to focus on the symbolic functions of language and objects. In other words, figurative language.

A lesson on figurative language would make thought about the mockingbird much easier for students. Having internalized the terms around figurative language, I often forget that my students need to be introduced to these terms before they can articulate a conceptual application of them. When I finally express my own thinking about the mockingbird, my mistake becomes clear. The mockingbird is a metaphor, on the one hand—one can apply it directly to a character and find a meaningful relationship (and some language play); on the other hand, it is a symbol of innocence, beauty, or vulnerability (or something else) that is desecrated in the novel to make a point (about justice, among other things). Because such a rich understanding of the mockingbird requires one to understand figurative language and how it functions in literature, I should have provided a lesson on figurative language and how to talk about it. With the right vocabulary and a chance to think about the mockingbird figuratively in the context of a lesson about figurative language, my students would have probably felt more confident about writing about it in their papers.

The question then, which is never an easy one for me to answer, is When have I given them too much? I want them to come up with their own conclusions about the figurative use of the mockingbird, so I worry that a lesson on figurative language before the paper might be writing the papers for them. To teach an effective lesson on figurative language

without “giving it away,” I must truly teach for understanding and transfer: I must design a lesson that worked on figurative language in a completely different kind of context—a sneaky move, but one that would really allow the paper to assess understanding of figurative language.

Not only do I worry about giving too much by doing too much thinking for the students, I worry that the task asks students to do too many things at once. Bruner discusses this idea of examining how much goes into the learning episode: “Indeed, the amount of new information in any learning episode is really the amount that we cannot quite fit into place at once. And there is a severe limit, as we have already noted, on how much of such unassimilated information we can keep in mind” (51-52). There is a limit to how many different—especially if they are new—things students can do at once. When I look back at this assignment, I am stunned that I asked students to do it in one draft. Something must give in a situation like this: either the essay must be simplified and not ask students to show mastery of so many new skills and concepts, or the essay must be written in drafts. If it were written in drafts, I think the essay would work well—with all the appropriate scaffolding, of course.

VI. Concluding Reflection

The main reason that the mockingbird essay did not go the way I had hoped is my lack of clear expectations. I had not given enough thought to my assessment. I should have examined the prompt more to understand exactly how this essay would show me what I wanted my students to master. Since comparison and understanding figurative language were a part of my final assessment, they should have been a major part of my teaching toward the essay. More than anything, the mockingbird essay incident taught me the importance of what Grant Wiggins calls “backward planning” (Instruction by Design). Instead of designing the task and then figuring out what how to assess it, I should design the assessment and figure out what needs to precede it. The mockingbird essay was a case of unclear expectations. If I first recognize what I am looking for in the end, I can design the activities that precede the final assessment to support that end.