

Scaffolding

“Scaffolding helps students, especially those struggling ones develop and sustain their ability to conceptualize.” This was part of the description of one of the workshops at the NCTE 2008 Annual Convention held in San Antonio, Texas. The three presenters were Joyce Armstrong Carroll, Arcelia Leon, and Javier Martinez.

Books about heroes, revealing their front covers, were lined up from one end to the other of the table at the front of the conference room. Theme music from Superman was playing as the presenters handed out brass brads, two strips of coloured craft paper, an 8 1/2 x11 inch piece of green paper, and a small green plastic jewel to everyone in the room. This was indeed mysterious! What did all these things have to do with scaffolding, or with heroes?

On a huge sheet of white paper, Joyce began writing some words using a green marker: hero, pre-amble, innovative, paranoia, gas chambers, crystal, Krypton. Everyone wrote these words on his or her sheet of green paper. These were words from an article we would be reading about Superman. We were asked if we could come up with a focus question about heroes/heroism, and what we settled on was, “What are the qualities of a hero?”

We looked at the words and discussed their meanings and possible connection to the question. We even looked at the structure of the words, especially any which had prefixes or suffixes.

At this point we were given an article from The International Herald Tribune of Saturday-Sunday, July 1-2, 2006. Written by Erik Lunegaard, it was entitled: *Truth, Justice and (fill in the blank)*. We were asked to skim through the article to locate and highlight dates and information about Superman’s image. The audience was divided into four groups, and the article was divided into four sections. Each group was instructed to read its section in chorus, section by section. The idea behind the choral reading was to allow the struggling readers to feel comfortable reading aloud while not being singled out. What one can do in a group today, can be done on one’s own at a later time.

What we discovered was that each group had a section of the article that corresponded to a specific time period in the development of Superman’s image.

Next, with a partner we had to take one of the strips of craft paper we had been given and write a few facts from the time period we had read about. On the other side of the same strip, we were asked to write the date from the section we had read. On the second strip we were asked to find a slogan in the text that was associated with Superman during that time period. We were also asked to write the name of the author of the article (a first step towards citing sources) as well as our name and the name(s) of the partner(s) we had worked with.

The next step was to line up the strips with the dates and slogans, and bind them together end to end using the brass brads, making a time line using everyone’s contribution. We now had a visual representation of what Superman’s image was like from his beginnings to the present, as well as dates and facts about the real world at the time: an interesting mix to begin a discussion about how a hero is perceived at different eras, as well as some data which might explain the shifting viewpoint. This collection of ideas resembled a carpenter’s folding ruler, and it was attached to a bulletin board after some discussion about what configuration of curves it should have, to best represent the ideas it embodied. Some wanted it to be laid out as a letter **S** for “Superman,” while some said that a circle might represent how ideas sometimes come back when political correctness allows them to re-surface. This was to serve as a physical reminder of the concept of heroism and reconnected us to our focus question. The word chart was brought out again and we reconnected with the vocabulary and ideas that came from the article. Especially interesting was the discussion generated by “gas chamber,” which many assumed would have been a place Superman might have exercised his super powers.

Equipped with this information about “heroism,” it would now be easier to read about Gilgamesh, Beowulf or even Cu Chulainn, and write about them as well. The scaffold had been built.

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