Struggle for Survival: A Unit Plan Integrating the Use of Film in Language Arts

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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Purpose of Thesis

This unit plan is designed for the sixth-grade English class of honors students that I will be student teaching next semester. The unit incorporates all of the elements of the language arts, but focuses primarily on the use of film as a text and teaching tool for the stimulation of writing. At the beginning of the unit, there is a detailed description of the goals and expectations for the unit, as well as an explanation that answers many questions relevant to this particular unit. Also included in the unit is a day-by-day narrative account of all planned activities and an explanation of evaluation methods that will be used. Finally, this unit includes a section that describes all the materials that will be needed and a section that considers the issues of practicality when teaching the unit.
INTRODUCTION

This unit is designed for a sixth grade language arts classroom at Plaza Park Middle School in Evansville, Indiana. The students are members of an honors class called Horizon. The average class size for the Horizon classes are twenty-eight students. During this unit, special opportunities for discussion or exploration may arise from the film, such as a discussion on running away or losing a pet. Also, a student may possibly become interested in the lumbering business and want to do further exploration on the subject. The only difficulties which may be encountered in this unit are a few "bad words" and a short scene in the film in which the main character kills a rabbit for food. If there are any sensitive students in the class, this scene may be unpleasant for them.

RATIONALE

A. As a result of this unit, I expect the students to gain an appreciation for film as a learning tool. Since the primary focus of the Horizon classes is writing, my main concern is that the students begin to learn how to use film as a stimulus for writing. Through viewing The Journey of Natty Gann the students will become better acquainted with the ways in which film can create effects, raise issues, and evoke responses. They will learn to share and respond to these characteristics of the film through writing. In addition, the students will practice their speaking and listening skills both in discussion groups and by performing their screenplays at the end of the unit.

B. I intend to encourage the students to steer away from looking at film as a passive activity or merely something to watch on a Saturday night. Instead, I will encourage the students to view film as not simply a form of entertainment, but as a way of learning. The unit will promote a viewer-response approach to the studying of film in which the students relate what they see to their everyday lives. By
forming personal reactions about the film that they view, the students can explore ideas and apply related themes to the world around them. In addition, I intend for the students to begin to learn how to understand, appreciate, and control these powerful stories that they see every day. These young viewers will be encouraged to question and ponder what they see, what they feel, and what they believe. Their reactions can bring depth and insight into the film.

C. This unit uses both film and written text to help the students understand and respond to the important issues in the unit. The film, *The Journey of Natty Gann*, will be utilized in perhaps a different approach than the students are accustomed to. It will be used as a means of catching the students' attention and then sustaining it by exploring the themes and issues of the film as they apply to the students' lives today. The short story "After Twenty Years" will be used as a motivation for the students' creation of a screenplay at the end of the unit. By reading this suspenseful and intriguing story, the students will have interesting material to work with in the creation of their screenplay. In addition, the screenplay will provide a connection between the story and the film by comparing and contrasting the various effects of the two texts.

D. In this unit, the students will be encouraged to think critically about what they read and see. First, by using the viewer-response approach to the viewing of the film, the students will have to apply, analyze, synthesize, and evaluate information that they see in the film. The students will write about their ideas, feelings, and judgments in an informal and formal manner. Also, they will be required to share their ideas with peers in small discussion groups. In the creation of their own short screenplay, the students will also have to think critically by analyzing and
evaluating information from the story and film and applying it to this writing activity.

E. Since the focus of this unit is on writing, the students will be given a significant amount of time to work on their writing. First, they will be given a freewriting topic at three particular points during the viewing of the film. These freewritings offer the students a chance to explore their ideas and feelings without the pressure of producing a final product. In other words, these activities serve as the prewriting stage of the writing process. The students will also share their freewritings with other classmates in order to exchange thoughts and ideas. At the conclusion of the film, the students will be able to choose one of their writings that they wish to take to the production stage of writing. They will be allowed time in class to work on their writing so that they can receive any guidance that they may need from me. In addition, the students will have the opportunity to peer edit one another’s papers providing helpful comments and suggestions. Finally, the students will be creating their own screenplays from a short scene of a story that they will read. This writing activity will involve the students’ use of what they saw in The Journey of Natty Gann as well as their own imagination and creativity.

F. There should not be many problems encountered when teaching this unit. The film The Journey of Natty Gann can be found at most video stores but is not available to purchase in stores right now because of Walt Disney restrictions. There are no apparent technical, financial, or even parent-administration problems anticipated by the teaching of this unit. Of course, it may be difficult to motivate sixth-grade students to look at film material critically and actively rather than passively. I intend to encourage the students to view the film in an active manner by giving them a viewer sheet that offers questions to think about when watching
the film and suggests particular points where they should pay close attention. I have also planned to vary the daily activities enough to develop and sustain student interest by engaging them in individual, small group, and whole class activities. Each day’s work, whether it be viewing, writing, discussion, or editing, will help the students to achieve the main goals of the unit.

G. Evaluation of this unit is simple and will benefit both the teacher and student. Basically, the students will keep a writing folder which will hold all the writing that the students produce for this unit. There will only be two writings from that folder which are actually graded: the screenplay and one writing of the student’s choice. The students will be given credit for their work on the other writing but will not be given an actual grade. This cuts down on my grading time, which allows me more time for instruction and guidance while the students are writing. During the viewing of the film and discussion time, I will be circulating the room observing to make sure that everyone is on task. If the students enjoy the unit and their writings genuinely reflect their relation of the film to the outside world, I will consider the unit a success. The screenplay may be challenging for the students, but I think that they will enjoy the assignment and find it rewarding when they perform their screenplays at the conclusion of the unit. If the screenplay is not successful, I may have to alter the assignment or provide more writing instruction time.

**DAILY PLANNED ACTIVITIES**

**CLASS ONE:** To introduce the unit to the students, I will begin the class with an activity that will excite the students and prepare them for the unit ahead. Since the main theme of the unit is survival, the students will be given a survival challenge. I will divide the students into five groups of five or six, and each group will be given a survival scenario. (Handout) The differing survival scenarios consist of a
description of the setting that the "survivors" are in and a list of items that could be used in a survival situation. The students will pretend that they are the survivors of their particular scenario and must decide, given their survival situation and setting, which eight of the items will be most important for their survival. They will be given about thirty minutes to discuss their situation. During the remaining fifteen minutes of class, each group will explain to the other members of the class their survival scenario and reasons for choosing the items that they did.

CLASS TWO: For the first ten minutes of class I will conduct a whole-class discussion, allowing the students to comment on the survival activity from the day before. I will link the activity to the movie that we are about to begin watching. The students will be given a viewer response sheet that they are to follow as they are watching the movie. For the next twenty minutes, the students will watch the movie. Then, the movie will be stopped, and the students will begin a freewriting activity. (See attached sheet)

CLASS THREE: This class period the students will begin by watching the movie for the first thirty minutes of class. Then, for the next ten minutes the students will be given another freewriting activity. (See attached sheet) During the remaining five minutes, the students can share their ideas and writings with a partner.

CLASS FOUR: This class period will be devoted entirely to watching the movie.

CLASS FIVE: At the beginning of the class, we will finish watching the movie. For the next twenty minutes of class, the students will be put into small groups and given discussion topics to discuss as a group. The students will be directed to write down the questions and issues that arise through their discussion. For the remaining ten minutes of class, the students will freewrite about what was discussed in their groups. (See attached sheet)

CLASS SIX: During this class period, the students will choose a piece of writing from the three writings that they have accumulated in their writing folder to take
through the writing process. They will begin writing their rough drafts in class so that they will have the opportunity to ask me any questions that they may need answered.

CLASS SEVEN: The students will be given a chance to write for the entire class period.

CLASS EIGHT: At the beginning of this class, I will explain to the students the directions for peer editing, offering suggestions for comments and questions. Then, the students will exchange papers with several classmates and edit each other’s papers. Once they have had their papers edited, they will begin revisions. At the end of class, I will remind the students that they must turn their final drafts into their writing folders the next day.

CLASS NINE: During this class, we will begin the reading portion of the unit. As a prereading activity, I will introduce O. Henry’s short story "After Twenty Years" by giving the students the title of the story and then letting them make predictions about the story’s content. I will record the students’ predictions on the chalkboard. Once everyone has made his/her predictions, I will present an overhead of the story to the class. The story will be divided into three sections; the students will read each section of the story silently, pausing between sections to make new predictions and to revise previous predictions. At the end of the story, the students will be divided into groups where they will be given a copy of the story. Each group will review the story, searching for the numerous clues that the author gives which lead the reader to the surprise ending. During the few remaining minutes of class, I will remind the students to be ready to discuss the next day the clues that they discovered.

CLASS TEN: At the beginning of class, we will discuss the various clues that the students found when searching the story. We will talk about the surprising nature of the story and discuss how O. Henry used language to create certain effects and
moods throughout the story. Then we will relate our observations of the story to film. We will talk about the ways in which words can be combined to create a visual image for the reader. To demonstrate this idea, I will show the students a short clip from *The Journey of Natty Gann* in which Natty lets the wolf go back to the woods. Then, the students will be put into pairs and will write a half-page description of the clip, attempting to create a textual version of the clip. For the remaining ten minutes of class, I will explain their next writing assignment which they will begin the next day.

**CLASS ELEVEN:** For the first ten minutes of class I will describe to the students the screenplay writing assignment. Then they will be put into groups of three. Allowing the students a lot of freedom, I will tell each group to choose a short scene from "After Twenty Years" which they would like to develop into a screenplay. For the remainder of class, the students will begin working on their screenplays. I will remind them that they must include stage directions, sound, and lighting in their screenplay to create an entire effect. When the screenplays are finished, they will be acted out by the groups for the class.

**CLASS TWELVE:** The students will work on their screenplays the whole class period, while I circulate the room providing guidance when needed.

**CLASS THIRTEEN:** Again the students will work on their screenplays. If they finish in class, they may begin practicing their performances which will begin the next day.

**CLASS FOURTEEN:** For the entire period, the groups will perform their screenplays for the class. They will be encouraged to bring in any music, props, costumes, or sound devices that they need. After each performance, the students will be allowed to give reactions and comments to the groups.
MATERIALS

This unit requires very few materials. The film is a Walt Disney production titled *The Journey of Natty Gann*, (1985, PG, 101 min.). Of course, a VCR is needed to play the film. The written text used in this unit is a short story "After Twenty Years" by O. Henry. This story can be found in numerous anthologies or in books which contain a collection of O. Henry's short stories. Finally, an overhead projector is needed for the reading of the overhead copy of the story. Also, the teacher may want to supply folders that the students can use as their writing folders or ask the students to provide their own. Copies of the viewer response sheet, freewriting topics, and discussion questions are attached.

ISSUES OF PRACTICALITY

I believe that this unit is quite practical in respect to time and topic. The preparation time required to teach this unit may only consist of watching the film and reviewing the unit plan. The unit is planned to take about ten to fourteen days to complete, depending on the amount of time that students need to thoroughly complete the writing process. A student should not be hurried when writing, but be given time to think and revise. Still, the class time taken to complete the unit is quite practical. In addition, grading time is kept to a minimum due to the number of writings that are actually graded. In essence, I think that this unit could be taught as it would ideally be set up.

Finally, the structure and topic of this unit is a practical study for most students that a teacher may encounter. Most students, no matter what their background, will be able to apply the themes of the unit to their own experience. Whether the student comes from a privileged background or not, he/she will have dealt with some issue
of "survival" in his/her life. If adaptations need to be made, they can easily be made within the writing assignments or discussion topics.

Specifically, this unit is a practical study for the students that I will be teaching, while the goals of this unit are consistent with the general goals of the sixth grade Horizon classroom at Plaza Park Middle School. As Sheila Means, the classroom teacher, specified, throughout the year the Horizon students are taught to write using the writing process. When writing, they are often asked to rely on personal experience to produce meaningful writings. In addition, Means utilizes the writing portfolio in her classroom and emphasizes peer evaluation as well as self-revision for each piece of work. The Horizon students are also often challenged to use their creativity in the writing process. These yearly goals for the Horizon classroom can easily be seen in the general goals of the survival unit. Throughout this unit the students are continually working on writing that will be included in their writing portfolios. Their writings stem from personal experiences, while the creation of their screenplays encourages their use of creativity and invention. The students are provided a generous amount of time to work through the writing process, taking two pieces of work to final product. Lastly, during the writing process, the students are encouraged to evaluate their peers' writing by offering helpful comments and suggestions where they are needed.
SURVIVAL CHALLENGE

Directions: The following explanations describe several survival settings. In your groups, discuss your assigned survival scenario and your setting. Assume that the number of surviving passengers is the same number of persons in your group, and that you and the other survivors have decided to stay together. Choose the eight items from the list below that would be most useful to your survival. Write down each item and be prepared to explain in detail how it would help you survive.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>bandage kit</th>
<th>newspapers (one per person)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>compass</td>
<td>two ski poles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>knife</td>
<td>map</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30 feet of rope</td>
<td>family-size chocolate bar (one per person)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>flashlight with batteries</td>
<td>extra shirt and pants for each survivor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>plastic bag</td>
<td>book of matches</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Date: January 10     Time: 11:00 A.M.

**Scenario 1**
Your plane crashed in a remote desert in the Middle East. You and all the other passengers escaped the crash uninjured. Shortly before the crash, the pilot announced that you were twenty miles northwest of a small town. However, the plane was off course, and the pilot had no time to radio for help. Temp: 110 degrees

**Scenario 2**
Your cruise ship sunk in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. You and the other passengers are safely floating in a lifeboat. Temp: 86 degrees

**Scenario 3**
Your helicopter just crashed on the side of a mountain in the Swiss Alps during a snowstorm. There is a small lake near the crash sight. You and the other passengers are dressed for a day of snow skiing. Temp: -40 degrees

**Scenario 4**
Your plane crashed on a deserted tropical island in the Pacific Ocean. The pilot had just announced that you would be arriving at the airport in Hawaii in approximately thirty minutes. Temp: 92 degrees

**Scenario 5**
Your plane crashed in the middle of a huge rain forest in Southwest Brazil. It has been raining for six days straight. You and the other passengers are dressed in clothing appropriate for city wear—suits, pantsuits, and street shoes. Temp: 60 degrees
VIEWER-RESPONSE SHEET

Why does Mr. Gann choose to take the job in Washington? What would you have done if you were Mr. Gann?

Why do you think Wolf is so protective of Natty?

Why does Mr. Gann choose to become a topper? Have you ever just felt like giving up?

How does the stranger from Chicago really feel about Natty?

How did you feel when: Natty let the wolf go? She was running after her father on the mountain? The movie ended?

If you could change the story in any way, would you? Why or why not?
FREEWriting ACTIVITIES

Freewriting- Class Two
After Natty's father leaves for Washington, she seems to be lonely and afraid. In your own words, what is loneliness? Describe a time of loneliness in your own life.

Freewriting- Class Three
Why do Natty and Wolf become such good friends? In what ways are Natty and Wolf alike? Have you ever had a special friend in your life that? A parent, a classmate, a pet? Describe your friend and explain why he or she is so special to you.

Freewriting/Discussion Topics- Class Five
Natty had to fight to survive on her journey to find her father. Along the way she encountered many struggles. What kinds of struggles do you encounter in your own life? Why do you consider these things struggles? How do your struggles differ from Natty's and how are they the same?