**Book Talk: Lesson Activity Plan**

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*The Year of Secret Assignments* by Jaclyn Moriarty

Moriarty, J. (2004). *The year of secret assignments*. New York, NY: Scholastic.

**Summary**

The students of two rival schools, Ashbury and Broofield, are forced to partake in a pen-pal program in hopes of bringing together the two schools and reducing rivalry. Emily, Lydia, and Cassie or Ashbury are paired with Charlie, Sebastian, and Matthew of Brookefield. These students get to know each other throughout the school year and find out that they have many similar interests.

Emily boosts Charlie’s confidence by coaching him through simulation dates and giving him advice on how he can win his crush. Lydia and Seb send secret missions to each other that get increasingly harder and more daring as the book continues. However, Cassie’s pen-pal, Matthew, remains elusive and shady. Her two best friends team up with the Brookfield boys to solve the mystery of Cassie’s mysterious pen-pal.

The story is told in a non-narrative format with letters to each other, journal entries, emails, and the transcript of a fake trial. The readers immediately notice that each character has a very distinct personality, and the fonts for each letter set each character’s letter apart.

**Learning Activity #1: Character Traits Collection**

**Learning Outcomes**

* understand unique identity and perspectives of different people
* consider how objects lend to an identity of a person, and how identity is partially dependent on the environment (culture, community, time period, etc.) and material objects to define them

**Grade 9 English SLOs**

* + 1.1 students take on a different point of view by attempting understand the characters thinking and actions by analyzing and reflecting
* 2.2 students understand how characters can grow and develop as they learn new information, but their motives for their actions need to be believable and gradual
* 2.3 students can identify how different people in the same situation can react differently and change outcomes of events in stories
* 3.3 students learn to pick out critical and important information that is relevant to their research
* 4.3 students learn presentation skills and choosing appropriate explanations to clarify their ideas to their peers
* 5.1: students see how the culture and period in history influences the way the text and characters are presented

**Reading**

The students will each have a copy of the book; there will be a schedule of which readings will be completed on each day. Students should read individually and then get together in small groups to discuss findings and share their organizational chart of character traits and characters (to be completed as they are reading).

**When is the Assignment Completed**

The students will complete this project after they have all completed the book. This will take approximately 4-5 classes to complete (depending on whether these classes are weekly or daily and how long they are). (Class #1: Teacher introduces assignment and shows example. Class #2: Students bring in their own examples to share, and begin brainstorming. Class #3/4: Students continue brainstorming, collecting items, and asking for help and clarification, if needed. Class #5: Students share a piece of their collection and hand them in.)

**Description (includes materials and teacher prep):**

The students will choose one key character from the novel and create a collection of 10-12 items that will describe or give clues/hints about that character’s personality, lifestyle, and preferences. If a person, who has never read the book, were to look through the collection of items, they would be able to make fairly accurate inferences about this character’s personality, habits, etc. A written reflection accompanying the collection is required to explain the reasoning behind each item. At the end of the project, students will share two items from their character collection with the class.

1. Before students begin reading the book, they will be required to create a chart that has the six names of the main characters across the top. As they are reading, they will fill in personality traits, habits, and observations about each character in the appropriate columns.
2. When the students are completed the novel, introduce the assignment. Go over expectations, process, schedule, rubrics, and answer any questions.
3. The teacher will bring in a few items that describe him/herself as an example to show the students, and have them infer what kind of personality traits or habits they would infer from the items.
   1. Example: knitting needles suggest that I knit; a fashion magazine suggests that I enjoy reading and learning about fashion; a doctor’s prescription note would indicate that I have been recently ill, etc.
   2. Have the students be aware that they are not just picking out objects that appear in the story; they have to describe the character’s personality in some way. For example, in the story, Charlie pulls an evacuation alarm, but if the student were to put in a picture of an alarm into the collection, they would be incorrect because the alarm is an event that happens and does not give any indication to Charlie’s personality. However, a detention slip detailing the event of Charlie pulling the alarm would indicate that has committed an offense, and perhaps, has a history of delinquency.
4. After showing the students the teacher example, for the next day, have students bring in two objects that indicate their own traits, habits, or interests to share with the class. This way, the teacher can make sure that each individual understands the assignment.
5. Have students choose a character and do a brainstorm web using the personality traits chart they had been filling out during the reading.
6. At the end, after sharing with the class, the students hand in their final collection, the written reflection, and any brainstorming charts/notes that show the writing process

**Assessment**

Students will be marked on quality of the chosen items (how well do they fit in the story and describe the character), the quality of the written response in justifying their choice, creativity, reflection in both the written response and the writing process (charts, brainstorming pages, etc.), and grammar/mechanics/spelling. The written reflection for each item should relate back to the character and how well the student is able to tie the symbolism of the item to a character trait/habit.

**Reflection**

This assignment challenges students to look at how identity can be created and tied to certain objects in their environment. Just like the readers are discovering the characters through non-traditional formats of narration (such as letters, emails, bulletin postings, etc.), the students are also learning to create a story and a person’s character through symbolism and cultural values tied to certain items and personality traits. It also allows them to take on a different perspective of different characters, and whether the student can do that in a way that is plausible and true to the original character. Applying it themselves and to other people, it is a way for students to learn to empathize with their peers and to understand that each person is a HUGE collection of personality traits that makes them unique. It may seem simple and straightforward, but when students sit down to think about how abstract concepts tie together with physical items, the assignment becomes much more challenging, and in the end, I believe, more rewarding to complete.

**Learning Activity #2: Letters in a Parallel Universe**

**Learning Outcomes**

* understand perspectives of different characters and how events can be skewed by different narrators and narration style
* understand how to write an informal, friendly letter
* confidently create original text using parallel or similar formats

**Grade 9 English SLOs**

* + 1.1 students take on a different point of view by attempting understand the characters thinking and actions by analyzing and reflecting
* 2.2 students understand how characters can grow and develop as they learn new information, but their motives for their actions need to be believable and gradual
* 2.3 students can identify how different people in the same situation can react differently and change outcomes of events in stories
* 3.3 students learn to pick out critical and important information that is relevant to their research
* 4.2 students create their own original text by imitating parallel structures of writing

**Reading**

The students will each have a copy of the book; there will be a schedule of which readings will be completed on each day. Students should read individually and then get together in small groups to discuss findings and share their organizational chart of characters, character traits, key events, etc. (to be completed as they are reading).

**When is the Assignment Completed**

The students will complete this project after they have all completed the book. This will take approximately 4 classes to complete (depending on whether these classes are weekly or daily and how long they are). (Class #1: Teacher introduces assignment and students begin brainstorming. Class #2: Students complete a first draft of letters. Class #3: Students will peer edit in partners and start on their final copies of the letters. Class #4: Allow time to ensure that all the students have been a given a fair amount of time to work on their letters. Assign remaining work for homework, if necessary. Students will hand in completed copies at the beginning of the next class.

**Description (includes materials and teacher prep):**

What if Emily and Charlie, Lydia and Seb, and Cassie and Matthew weren’t paired together for the pen-pal assignment? What if Charlie and Lydia ended up writing to each other instead? Or Cassie and Charlie? How do you think the story would have changed or the events differed? How would each person react to the other? Do you think that the story would have ended the same way that it did? Choose one of the following alternative pairs and write 3 letters from each person (6 letters total): Charlie and Lydia

Charlie and Cassie

Seb and Emily

Seb and Cassie

Matthew and Lydia

Matthew and Emily

1. Before students begin reading the book, they will be required to create a chart that has the six names of the main characters across the top. As they are reading, they will fill in personality traits, habits, and observations about each character in the appropriate columns.
2. When the students are completed the novel, introduce the assignment. Go over expectations, process, schedule, rubrics, and answer any questions.
3. Go over letter writing formats and details such as punctuation, grammar, tone, slang/language, etc.
4. Have the students brainstorm with a “Cause and Effect” chart that has a character/event on one side and the outcome of that. For example, Cause/Event: Emily coaches Charlie on how to act on a date; Effect: Charlie develops a crush on Emily and they start dating
   1. Have the students think about how these events would change if they were re-enacted with different characters.
   2. Example: in the story Cassie lets Matthew walk away after a hurtful encounter, but if it Lydia and Matthew were pen-pals, and she was in that situation instead of Cassie, would she have done the same, keeping in mind that Lydia has a much stronger and outspoken personality than Cassie?
5. When they are done the brainstorming, have the students complete a rough draft of their letters.
6. Allow for partner-peer editing to share and expand ideas, but also to correct details such as grammar/spelling/sentence structure.
7. Give students time to complete the final drafts of the letters. It is important to give them enough time to do this part because ideas may suddenly arise and develop while they are constructing the finished product.
8. At the end, the students hand in their final collection, the written reflection, and any brainstorming charts/notes that show the writing process.

**Assessment**

Students will be marked on how much consideration they put into how events would be affected when elements are manipulated, plausibility of those characters in the new situations, creativity, the writing process that shows development from the first drafts to the final copies, and grammar/mechanics/spelling. For the writing process, the teacher should look for evidence of reflection and growth as the student takes what he/she learns during the reading process (notes from charts, etc.), applies it to the assignment. This should be evident as the student develops and changes ideas from the first draft to the peer edit to the final copy.

**Reflection**

This assignment is meant to challenge the students to consider the contexts that influence responses and events. This allows students to think critically about how things may differ and how there can be more than one approach to certain problems. It can also introduce students to letter writing, and this activity can lead into another lesson about business letter writing. Although, friendly letters and business letters have different components, the students would be more aware of the tone and the person they are trying to portray in writing the letter. Like the first activity, this second activity also allows students the opportunity to develop understanding for different perspectives so that the individual students can learn to empathize and form deeper connections with various kinds of people.