

Bridging the Gap Between Adolescent and School Cultures

Teri Fowler and Bobbie Nichols

Enter the world of the adolescent, and you'll be immersed in a culture that abounds with rhythms, words, actions, values, and emotions. This richness comes from song, slang, dialect, dance, Web sites, music videos, electronic games, and fashion. Enter the world of school, on the other hand, and you'll too often find a tiresome, tedious place that asks the adolescent to participate in a series of activities that are not connected to him or his world and to interact with adults who know relatively little about him. For adolescents, everything changes when the bell rings.

It doesn't have to be that way. We can bridge the gap between adolescent culture and school culture by first understanding the deep need for adolescents to be steeped in rhythms, words, actions, values, and emotions. We can then create the kind of learning experiences that help students build their knowledge while also attending to that deep need. Educators at Pine Street Middle School in Texarkana, Tex., found that approaches such as literary solutions, arts integration, and service learning better blend adolescent and school cultures.

The Literary Solution

A literary solution is a purposeful extension of a story into real-life situations. Just as a software solution uses technology to enhance a work environment, a literary solution uses literature to enhance a learning environment. Consider the following literary solution implemented to increase student motivation and enhance goal setting:

When 6th grade students read *Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes* by Eleanor Coerr (1999, Puffin), they became fascinated with Japanese culture. They read the story in social studies classes and discussed the effects of World War II on Japanese culture in their small literary groups. They conducted Internet research to learn more about Sadako and the Japanese memorial ceremony held every year to honor her. Students then decided to test the Japanese belief that a wish will be granted if you fold 1,000 paper cranes.

The wish students agreed upon was to improve their performance on the state-mandated assessment. Working collaboratively, students, teachers, secretaries, maintenance staff, and administrators took ownership in the origami crane project. Blueprints for origami cranes were



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reproduced, colored, folded, counted, and suspended in flight about the campus. What started as an interdisciplinary unit in 6th grade social studies ended as a campuswide initiative, with students and teachers folding more than 1,000 origami cranes. When the unit concluded, the cranes were shipped to Hiroshima and placed at the Sadako memorial site.

Did the Japanese belief hold true? Yes. Results of the state assessment reflected growth. The improved performance was more likely the result of a heightened awareness of test requirements rather than the paper cranes. Nonetheless, the literary solution allowed students to apply aspects of the story line to address a real-life issue. Each crane represented a wish, a relationship, and a memory for each individual's emotional file. The literary solution enhanced the learning environment while fostering relationships, thus bridging the gap between adolescent and school cultures.

Arts Integration

Through the arts, we can link the patterns and rhythms of adolescent culture to learning experiences in school contexts. When the arts meet project-based learning, learners actively engage in processes that deepen understandings and abilities. Consider the following arts integration project, which captured aspects of adolescent culture in a school environment:

Students and teachers partnered with their regional arts center to create batik panels that represented the students' concept of self, school, or community. The panels illustrated religious beliefs, team sports, extra-curricular activities, ecology, celebrations, and other topics relevant to the middle school culture. Science, mathematics, social studies, language, and art were integrated into the activity. The project required that students understand the scientific effects of physical and chemical change and the social concept of interdependence. Under the supervision of the artist-in-residence, students worked cooperatively in small groups to measure and cut two-foot panels. They waxed material, decided on color palettes, discussed and created designs, painted using fabric dye, inserted grommets for hanging, and together celebrated the final product. Additional panels were available for staff members to design.

This collection of batiks were woven together and hung as a symbol of a diverse group of students and teachers unified through an artistic creation. Embedded in the batik mosaic was an expression of adolescent culture—a visual representation of the internal and external conflicts experienced by the adolescent learner as well as an expression of adult ethical, legal, and moral values.

Service Learning

Teachers must take a "community-as-text" approach to learning if content is going to be meaningful and relevant to the everyday lives of their adolescent learners, write Milbrey McLaughlin and Martin Blank in "Creating a Culture of Attachment: A Community-as-Text Approach to Learning" (*Education Week*, November 10, 2004). Service-learning projects offer a natural way to use the community as a resource for learning. The following service-learning project was designed to promote literacy and learning throughout the school community and beyond:

Campus test scores indicated males—especially those from low socioeconomic environments—scored lower in reading than their female counterparts. These adolescent males valued athletics and relationships with girls but showed little interest in reading. With this in mind, the school initiated the “Real Men Read” project.

Members of the digital graphics class took photos of a cross-section of successful men in the community and state. Each photo captured the reader and his favorite book. The president of the school board read his favorite childhood book, *Flutterby* by Stephen Cosgrove (1995, Price Stern Sloan). *Start Something*, by Earl Woods (2000, Simon & Schuster), was the chosen favorite of a law enforcement officer. Even the governor, when visiting our campus, was photographed with his selection, *Heart of a Leader* by Ken Blanchard (1999, Honor Books). The high school graphics class enlarged the photos so that framed posters of “real men reading” could be displayed at the middle school campus and on elementary campuses as well.

We can bridge the gap between adolescent and school cultures. Tapping into adolescent emotion and potential, while helping them build their knowledge, requires activities in which all members of the school community share strengths as they work together toward a common goal. Literary solutions, arts integration, and service-learning projects capture the essence of adolescent culture, make learning more meaningful, and enhance the relationships between teachers, students, and other members of the school community.

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