

Our New Mythologies Speculative Fiction Unit

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Abstract

This unit is designed for the 7th grade English/Language Arts class. The purpose of this unit is to introduce students to diverse speculative fiction and help them explore the purposes, types, and elements of speculative fiction. The unit is embedded with cultural exploration and celebration through the reading and writing of new mythologies. Students will read different genres of speculative fiction, written by and for a wide array of People of Color and will discuss and analyze the material through literature circles. The class will brainstorm visionary fiction with the theme of building a better world. Students will use this brainstorming to write their own speculative fiction with a goal of imagining a brighter and more just future and creating their own new mythology.

Content Objectives

This unit is designed for students in 7th grade English/Language Arts (ELA) classrooms in a diverse Philadelphia public K-8 school. There are three classes, with each class cycling into this ELA room for 90 minutes daily.

Problem Statement

This is my eleventh year teaching seventh grade ELA at Greenberg Elementary School. Greenberg's ethnic make-up for the 2018-19 year was 48% White, 27% Asian, 11% Black/African American, 8% Hispanic/Latinx, 5% Multi Racial/Other. There are dozens of languages spoken at Greenberg. The most spoken languages other than English at Greenberg, from greatest to least, are Malayalam, Uzbek, Russian, Mandarin, Arabic, and Ukrainian (School District of Philadelphia, 2018).

Since I started teaching, I have sought to make the literature in my classroom diverse. I found that the easiest way to do this was by teaching mainly through historical fiction units. I felt most comfortable with historical fiction because I am a history buff, it has been my favorite genre since I was a child, and I just did not know of many other genre books for seventh graders with diverse characters.

My main goal as a teacher of reading is to increase how much my students read by encouraging them to discover a love of reading. I have not been successful with all my students. However, I sincerely believe that students who say they do not like reading just have not found the right book yet. Therefore, I need to effectively introduce my students to all the genres they might love, not just the ones I love. I must expand my own knowledge of books to recommend and assign, including a diversity of genres and authors.

The first way I attempted to diversify the genres of reading in my class, while further diversifying the authors and characters of the text, was by taking the Storytelling of the Middle East and Southeast Asia Teacher Institute of Philadelphia (TIP) course in the spring of 2019. The course helped me to introduce students to ancient stories of many cultures. I developed a unit where students choose folktales from all over the world to read. Through

reading these folktales, students learn the components of the genre. From this learning they write their own folktales reflecting their own diversity.

When I was reading the course previews for the 2020 TIP classes, I came across a line by Dr. Ebony Thomas, “The success of new narratives such as Black Panther in the Marvel Cinematic universe, Black Lightning on DC TV, and the blossoming of Afrofuturistic and Black fantastic tales, proves that all people need new mythologies” (Thomas, 2019). I knew then that in order to assist all my students in becoming lovers of reading and writing, I needed to study and embrace the diverse world of speculative fiction. I can start off my year with my unit on folktales, so students can be proud of the mythologies of their heritage. However, students need to end the year by reading and seeing themselves in the future and the fantastic. Once they have seen themselves in speculative fiction, they can create hope by creating speculative fiction, imagining in their own writing how the world can be.

Rational

The main reason I rarely read fantasy and never read science fiction unless required, was that I could not relate to these genres and they often portrayed a very dark and depressing future. My first fantasy love came in middle school with the Harry Potter series, because I related strongly to Hermione Granger. It was not until I read and discussed the *Dark Fantastic* that I realized that I was not alone in my reasoning for disliking speculative fiction. Mainly only white cis-gendered straight man can see themselves in speculative fiction because for hundreds of years, white cis-gendered straight men were the only ones able to publish speculative fiction. Therefore, speculative fiction has mirrored and reinforced our white supremacist patriarchal heteronormative society. Dr. Thomas’ book made me see that this is more than a missed opportunity, that this is a let-down for students of color who may have found their love of reading in speculative fiction. In her introduction, she explains that there is a lack of research into the effect on children of color on their representation (or lack thereof) in books and other media. Furthermore, previous research has not considered how current non-diverse fiction shapes the lives of those young people and determines if they will want to read in the future (2019, p. 7).

Dr. Thomas began that research in *The Dark Fantastic* and other scholarly works, and the results are not promising. “When youth grow up without seeing diverse images in the mirrors, windows, and doors of children’s and young adult literature, they are confined to single stories about the world around them and, ultimately, the development of their imaginations is affected” (2019, p. 9). Imagination may seem frivolous to many adults and even some educators. However, in our course sessions, and most notably, taking this class during the Covid-19 pandemic, we explored the importance of imagination to cope with and combat the trauma that youth, especially youth of color, face daily. Escape and joyful reimagining are needed, yet, how is that possible if you cannot see yourself in those stories? However, people of color are not absent in popular speculative fiction. They are present, just not explicitly named.

Popular speculative fiction presents people of color in a cycle that Dr. Thomas names “The Dark Fantastic”, which has five steps (2019, p.26). The first step, Spectacle, is where people of color are presented as “the dark” other, the unnatural, the monster, the bad that needs to be defeated (2019, p.26). Next is Hesitation, where the dark other disturbs or unsettles the harmony of life for the people (white). The third stage is the necessary Violence that must occur to the other because of the unrest the presence of the dark other has created.

Often this violence leads to the death of the dark other. However, this only leads to the next step, Haunting, in which the dark other must stay on, haunting the story in order to provide excitement and meaning. The final step, Emancipation, happens when the Dark Other is freed from the cycle. Stories rarely reach this stage. It is more popular to keep Dark Other trapped. Those stories that reach emancipation are seen as unbelievable, and therefore not marketable (2019, p.26).

Dr. Thomas explains that, “This perspective often means that the implicit message that readers, hearers, and viewers of color receive as we read these texts is that *we are the villains. We are the horde. We are the enemies. We are the monster*” (2018, p. 4). I realized that presenting traditional speculative fiction in the classroom without a critical eye is a form of curriculum violence. Curriculum violence is defined in *Curriculum Violence: America’s New Civil Rights Issue*, and reported in “Ending Curriculum Violence” in *Teaching Tolerance* as, “a ‘deliberate manipulation of academic programing’ which ‘compromises the intellectual or psychological well-being of learners’” (Jones, 2020). Furthermore, in *Teaching Tolerance*, author Stephanie P. Jones goes on to say that curriculum violence, “does not have to be deliberate or purposeful... Intentionally is not a prerequisite for harmful teaching.” Jones goes on to state that, “Curriculum violence occurs when educators and curriculum writers have constructed a set of lessons that damage or otherwise adversely affect students intellectually and emotionally” (2020).

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire talks of the purposes of education, saying that education can either function to keep the normal structures of stratification and oppression in place, or it can function to break these structures and radically change and equalize society. Teaching traditional speculative fiction would be reinforcing oppression. What would breaking the structures look like? The answer, which I learned from the course, is visionary fiction and Afrofuturism. Unlike, the dark, dystopian worlds of the ‘technology gone wrong’ science fiction of my childhood, visionary fiction is, “a term we developed to distinguish science fiction that has relevance toward building new, freer worlds from the mainstream strain of science fiction, which most often reinforces dominant narratives of power. Visionary fiction encompasses all of the fantastic with the arc of always bending toward justice” (Imarisha, 2015, p. 4).

In “25 Years of Afrofuturism and Black Speculative Thought”, Tiffany E. Barber explains that, “Afrofuturism combines science fiction elements to imagine alternate worlds with regard to racial politics and belonging. In so doing, it is seen as a way to make sense of the past and its relevance to our black political present.” Also, “In select writings by scholars ... Afrofuturism is a revisionist discourse in which racialized, gendered bodies use technology to reparative ends” (Barber, 2018, p. 3). I internalized this as *a discussion that changes something to improve it, in which people identified with a gender and race, use technology to make the world better.*

I aspire to have my classroom embody the principles that guide Afrofuturism. Currently, I teach a social justice curriculum called the Young Heroes Outreach Program (YHOP), with support from the National Liberty Museum. In this curriculum, students learn how to use student voice and the principles of collective action in order to create a social action project. However, this curriculum is often very separate from the fiction literature we read and lacks its associated creativity or joy. I need to bring visionary fiction and Afrofuturism into my classroom in order to integrate the different units in my curriculum and bring joy and hope into it.

In a similar vein, Dr. Stephanie Toliver discusses the importance of specifically Black writers and Black representation in science fiction and fantasy (SFF). in “Imaginative Spaces and Connecting Lines: SFF and the CSK”. I was amazed to discover from this article that Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Coretta Scott King were SFF fans. Martin even convinced Nichelle Nichols to continue her role as Lieutenant Uhura on *Star Trek*. In explaining Correta’s discussions with Martin during courtship over Edward Bellamy’s novel, *Looking Backward: 2000–1887*, Toliver posits, “Essentially, Scott King used a SFF novel to initiate conversations about the future of the world and how she and Martin could promote social justice for all minoritized people. SFF was a catalyst for thoughts about social change” (Toliver, 2019).

However, none of the Coretta Scott King Book Award winners have been from SFF genres, with the majority being realistic or historical fiction. The book award requires that winning books portray “ ‘aspect of the Black experience’ ” (Toliver, 2019). However, Toliver uses the work of Rudine Sims Bishop to show that SFF most certainly does this. Bishop put forth five ways all genres of the black literary tradition represent “The Black Experience”. They are: “(1) celebrates Black families, (2) recognizes Black people’s commitment to equity and social pride, (3) reflects the beauty and skill of Black children, (4) relies upon Black history and culture, and (5) honors stories as a method of teaching and knowing” (Toliver, 2019). Toliver then goes on to profile how several recent young adult SSF novels by Black authors with Black protagonists fulfill these five criteria. Considering the detrimental effects of a lack of representation in SSF for students of color, and the importance of Black SFF in representing the the Black experience, it is clear that speculative fiction or SFF by and for Black people and People of Color need to be taught in school. Therefore, I intend to develop a unit around reading diverse speculative fiction.

Background

When I started teaching seventh grade English over ten years ago, the eighth grade English teacher suggested I teach Greek mythology in order to prepare students for books in the cannon they would have to read in high school such as Shakespeare and the *Odyssey*. Many students, especially those who identify as male, really enjoy reading Greek mythology. Yet, it has bothered me more and more over the years how ethnocentric teaching just Greek mythology as classic literature is. However, the only mythology I have confidence in teaching is Greek mythology because no other other mythologies were in the curriculums taught to me in high school and college. I tried to remedy this when I took *Storytelling of the Middle East and Southeast Asia*, another course offered through TIP. The unit I created through my storytelling course was focused mainly on folktales. My class started the year and unit with the Indian myth of Mahabali. This story is central to the celebration of the holiday of Onam, which is an important holiday in Kerala, the Indian state where approximately thirty percent of my students are from. This myth leads us into other Indian stories. Then students branch off into groups and read folktales from a different region of the world, which they chose and teach the other students about. Finally, students write their own folktales, which they share with the class and I compile into a book.

It was Dr. Thomas’ assertion in the *The Dark Fantastic* course listing and her 2018 journal article, “*All people need new mythologies – new ‘stories about stories,’*” that made me realize that my quest for diversity was not finished. It gave me inspiration to connect my previous TIP unit to my new unit. We would move from the storytelling of the past to a new

world of diverse speculative fiction with folktales and mythology being a common thread, while using the literature to explore the diversity of the world and of our classroom.

Unit Outline

Shared Reading – *The People Could Fly*

An idea for how to start my unit came from the dystopia we found ourselves in as the course went on in the Spring of 2020. Suddenly, we were locked in our houses, not knowing when school would begin again, hearing scary projections on the news of a hundred thousand people dying in America alone. I tried to connect, engage, and reassure my students from afar while battling my own anxiety, loneliness, and helplessness. A week into the stay at home order, I reread *The People Could Fly* (Hamilton, 1985). I had read it the previous year through a folktale lens. However, I had borrowed it from the library again because Dr. Thomas and I had discussed how Hamilton's work, including this folktale, can be considered speculative fiction and even Afrofuturist. As I read, I began to tear up, connecting the hopeless situation of the enslaved people to the hopeless situation the world now found itself in. I wished we could just fly away from it and wanted to grab some hope from that metaphoric action. I wanted to discuss the book in this context with my students. The next day, I posted the story on Google Classroom, asking students to comment with their thoughts on the story and with comparisons to the current crisis. However, I think this was a difficult conversation to have remotely, as I got very few responses. Still, I was inspired to start my unit with a reading and discussion of *The People Could Fly* as a transition from folktales to speculative fiction. We would read *The People Could Fly* as shared reading, twice, the first day as a folktale informing us about the past, and the second day as speculative fiction as imagining the future.

Reflection on a Word

Next in my unit we will explore the vastness of speculative fiction and determine its components. It was exciting for me to learn that speculative fiction was not the narrow, depressing genre I previously thought. I realized there was much joy, hope, and connection. We did this in the course by reading and discussing academic articles on the subject. I puzzled over how to get my students to think critically on this complex topic. Reading academic articles would not be appropriate, and it would not be meaningful if I just explained to them what speculative fiction means. Then I remembered a technique I learned in Philadelphia Teaching Learning Cooperative (PTLC) called reflection on a word. We do this often in our PTLC meetings in order to explore a topic relevant to teaching and to help us be more reflective teachers. Recently, I saw how one member successfully utilizes the practice with her entire class of third graders. Instead of simply telling my students about speculative fiction, visionary fiction, and futurism, we will have reflections on these words. The benefit of the reflection on a word is summarized by master teachers, "The point of a reflection is not to winnow or define a word. The point is to uncover some of the richness of layered meaning the word embodies" (Strieb, 2012, p.42).

Literature Circles

The most important part of the unit would be literature circles, where students choose to read one of six or seven diverse speculative fiction books. I have learned from this course that people of color have been writing speculative fiction for as long as white men have been

writing it. These books are finally starting to be published. One genre of fantasy that I am very interested in exploring with my students are books that bring ancient mythologies into the modern world of teens. This genre would fit well into my current curriculum and works well for the very multicultural school I teach at. However, just as there are too many regions of the world for my class to read folktales from all of them, there are too many mythologies for my students to read fantasy books about all of them. Therefore, in similar fashion, I plan to have my class form literature circles, with students forming their book groups based on the mythology they want to read about.

I plan to start this unit in late winter/early spring. In the beginning of the school year we will have our world folktales unit. In the winter we will read Greek Mythology. With the speculative fiction literature circles, I could employ the same technique of student choice and students being the experts as I did in the folktale unit. Students would already have an understanding of mythology and the development of storytelling, so this would be the perfect time to introduce the idea of modern mythology for a new generation. It would also be a great transition from ancient mythology to all people creating their own mythology. It will hopefully show students that we can use ancient storytelling traditions to tell our own stories, grapple with the problems of today, enjoy reading and writing, escape, and even find hope.

In my research for my unit I read over a dozen young adult (YA) speculative fiction books, which are all listed in the resource section. Most of the books I chose fall into the newly popular subgenre of modern takes on ancient myths. However, I did expand into other types of speculative fiction because I realized not all students are going to be interested in that subgenre. All books I chose were unique, interesting, and important contributions to this neglected genre.

Furthermore, I selected the books with a number of important factors in mind. I chose the books below considering my students' interests and the time constraint of literature circles. I tried to get books with protagonists that represented the diversity of my school. I also picked books that were a range of reading levels from fourth through eighth grade. Finally, I did not want the books to feel like a chore, so I tried to keep the books to three hundred pages or less with a plot that had exciting forward momentum.

The books I plan to use are:

Baptiste, T. (2016). *The Jumbies*. Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Young Readers.

This is a book option for speculative fiction literature circles. It is an upper elementary fantasy novel involving creatures from Trinidadian folktales. It takes place on a Caribbean island and has all Black characters.

DasGupta, S., & To, V. (2018). *Kiranmala and the Kingdom Beyond: The Serpent's Secret*. New York: Scholastic Press.

This is a book option for speculative fiction literature circles. It is an upper elementary fantasy novel involving creatures from folktales from West Bengal, India. The protagonist is a middle school girl who lives in New Jersey but immigrated from India as a young child.

Hamilton, V. (1968) *The House of Dies Drear*. New York: Macmillan.

This is a book option for speculative fiction literature circles. It is an upper elementary school mystery/ghost novel with an African-American boy as the protagonist.

Hernandez, C. (2019) *Sal and Gabi Break the Universe*. New York: Disney-Hyperion.
This is a book option for speculative fiction literature circles. It is a teen science fiction novel with a modern day male Cuban-American middle school protagonist.

Meriano, A. (2018) *Love Sugar Magic: A Dash of Trouble*. New York: Walden Pond Press.

This is a book option for speculative fiction literature circles. It is an upper elementary fantasy novel involving Mexican folklore surrounding magic and The Day of the Dead. The protagonist is a middle school Mexican-American girl who lives in Texas.

Roanhorse, R. (2019) *Race to the Sun*. New York: Disney-Hyperion.

This is a book option for speculative fiction literature circles. It is a teen fantasy novel about Navajo mythology with a modern day female American middle school protagonist of Navajo descent.

Yep, L. & Ryder, J. (2015) *A Dragon's Guide to the Care and Feeding of Humans*. New York. Crown Books for Young Readers.

This is a book option for speculative fiction literature circles. It is an upper elementary fantasy novel. The protagonist is a female dragon from China. It takes place in San Francisco, CA. The human characters' race/ethnicities are not named, but they are presumably white.

I have been developing ideas for making literature circles more meaningful to students for years. When I started teaching, literature circles were still the favored/recommended practice, so I followed the sixth grade English teacher's lead, using whatever text sets I could get my hands on. Yet, many students did not enjoy them, so they did not put in much energy or take out much learning. Just as literature circles started to go out of fashion, I read *Teaching for Joy and Justice* by Linda Christensen (2009). She has a chapter on themed literature circles for social justice literacy teaching. Though her themed literature circle unit was on slavery and was for high school students, it seemed so meaningful that I knew I wanted to try something similar. I created a themed literature circle on WWII for my students to participate in after we read *Maus I* (Spiegelman, 1973). The books are memoirs and historical fiction books that cover diverse topics including the Navajo code talkers, the Japanese internment camps, the Kindertransport, and the Jewish partisan resistance movement.

However, even with this new, exciting, and better fitting unit, I still struggled to make the experience meaningful to my students. Many students still saw it as a chore. My colleague recommended a chapter from *Comprehension Shouldn't Be Silent: From Strategy Instruction to Student Independence* (2007). It contains mini-lessons and materials to use to get students thinking of literature circles as book clubs. I am excited to take what I learned about literature circles over the years and use those strategies on a new themed unit on speculative fiction. I think it is time to retire the WWII unit for something exciting and new.

By the time we start the WWII literature circles in the early spring, my students have primarily been reading historical fiction about heavy events all year. They seem burnt out on this genre. I am hopeful that they will have much more exciting and fruitful conversations when they are stretching their imaginations and that this imagination stretch can turn into

hopeful, creative speculative fiction writing. With this literature circle unit, I plan to add more strategies and corresponding mini-lessons from *Mini-lessons for Literature Circles*, a book which was recommended to me by Dr. Thomas. Some strategies/mini lessons that look promising for my classroom are the conversational warm-up, book pass, drawing, and save the last word for me (Daniel & Steineke, 2004).

Writing Speculative Fiction

As in the Afrofuturism model, I want students to use the past they learn about from these mythologies as reparative ends in the political present. Furthermore, as an English teacher, I also want students to write. Therefore, I want the second half of my speculative fiction unit to be a collective science-fiction/visionary fiction writing workshop. At first I thought I would have a simple brainstorming workshop, a style similar to the one we teachers engaged in during our second week of the course. This was based off of the one outlined at the end of *Octavia's Brood*. Dr. Thomas asked us to brainstorm the modern-day monsters and the dystopian horrors our students in Philadelphia face. We came up with ideas such as asbestos in schools, gun violence, lack of affordable housing, and the opioid crisis. Then we brainstormed the solutions, from the very practical to the magical. For example, for the housing crisis, ideas went from ending the tax abatement to building houses in the clouds. I found this activity creatively fulfilling and uplifting. It reminded me of a quote from an article we had recently read for the course about Octavia Butler. "We believe that visionary fiction is not utopian; it's realistic and it's hard, because that's the world we live in, but ultimately it's hopeful" (Williams, 2015).

In the workshop outlined in *Octavia's Brood*, participants identify problems in their community and city. Participants then identify two lead characters to be the heroes, intentionally focusing on marginalized voices. Next, they build a setting and identify what change the characters are seeking. Then they independently write stories in this world. Finally, the participants share their writing with each other and are inspired by each other (Imarisha, 2015, p. 281). This version of the workshop gives students more structure, so I thought to implement this workshop model for the writing portion of my unit.

However, for our second to last class meeting, we had a guest speaker, Dr. Stephanie Toliver. Dr. Toliver outlined her work in facilitating speculative fiction writing with Black pre-teen girls through a series of workshops. In preparation for the class, we read an article by Dr. Toliver and Keith Miller about her work facilitating speculative fiction writing for Black teens at a community-based writing program. The program had focused on creative nonfiction, realistic prose, and poetry that involved street level research. When one of the participants wanted to write about his community through the lens of science fiction, Keith Davis realized they were not equipped to support the student and called in Dr. Toliver. This made me realize that the genre of speculative fiction is a unique art that needs consideration when teaching. I was planning on using the outline of the *Octavia's Brood* workshop model to support students in brainstorming, but continue the writing process using a version of my regular fiction writing unit. I had adapted my fiction writing unit from Writing Workshop. Most years I have encouraged my students to write their story in any genre they wanted. However, Writing Workshop is specifically geared towards realistic fiction. Both the students and I have almost no experience writing speculative fiction. Dr. Toliver made me realize my previous unit is not going to adequately support my students to maximize their

potential in the speculative fiction genre. Therefore, I am going to create a new series of lessons to take students through the writing process based on what Dr. Toliver outlined in her article and in her presentation for our course. I will also go through this process myself beforehand in order to give myself some more experience (Toliver & Miller, 2019).

Major Unit Objectives

1. Students will be able to critically discuss the concepts of speculative fiction and futurism in collaborative discussions in order to building on each others ideas, and expressing their own clearly.
2. Students will read and discuss speculative fiction novels in groups in order to make inferences and determine the theme of the text.
3. Students will use narrative techniques in order to develop a speculative fiction story that unfolds naturally and logically and engages readers.
4. Students will ask questions respectfully and listen carefully and nonjudgmentally in order to develop an understanding of other people's histories and lived experiences.

Teaching Strategies

Literature Circles: A small group of students read the same book independently. The group of students gather throughout the reading of the book to discuss the text in depth. Students' responses to the book will guide the discussion. Participants of the groups build on what each member says, leading students to a deeper understanding standing of the book.

Mini-lessons: A mini-lesson is a short lesson that introduces a concept, teaches an isolated skill, extends previous learning, or introduces strategies. The students will then use what they learn in their mini-lesson, tasks, and proceeding class periods.

Reflection on a Word: Reflection on a word brings forth the vast and layered meaning of a word, phrase or concept through the input of all students/participants. Participants sit in a circle. The leader of the discussion announces the word and gives participants a few minutes for silent writing. "Each participant writes down the words, images, phrases the word calls to mind" (Strieb, 2012, p.62). Participants take turns sharing what they wrote. Then the chair pulls together the main themes brought up in everyone's reflections.

Close reading: Close reading is a deep dive into a text, involving at least three readings of the same text. The first reading is for enjoyment and to get the main idea of the text. The second reading is for deeper meaning. In this reading, we pause often to discuss and annotate the text. We look at structure, word choice, and figurative language, and determine how these affect meaning in the text. The third reading is with a specific purpose, usually analysis, comparison, or reflection. This is often done in pairs and with the aid of a graphic organizer to help students focus their thoughts on the specific purpose and record their learnings and realizations.

Shared Reading: Shared reading is when the teacher reads a text aloud while the students read along silently. This models reading fluency for students. This is a particularly important first step in shared reading, because in heterogeneous classrooms, the texts will almost always be above some students' independent reading levels. Teachers need to ensure that all students are able to access the content.

Annotating: Annotating is the act of marking up a text as you read to bring attention to certain elements in order to help the reader create meaning from the text. These elements could be structure, word choice, and figurative language. Students may also mark down their own thoughts and questions, including connections, inferences, and confusions.

Think-aloud: A think-aloud is when a teacher is explicitly verbalizing their thought process to students as they perform a task as a form of modeling for students.

Discussion: Different types of discussion models used include whole group discussion, turn and talk, and think/write-pair-share. Turn and talk is when a teacher poses an open-ended question for students to discuss with an assigned partner sitting close to them. Think/write-pair-share is when students think or write independently about a question or topic. Then students engage in discussion with a partner about the question or topic. Finally, students can volunteer to share out in a whole class discussion.

Graphic organizers: This unit uses several teacher-made graphic organizers to scaffold students' learning and achieve the content objective. Graphic organizers are papers given out to students to write on that already have visuals to show relationships between facts, terms, and ideas.

Cooperative Learning: Cooperative learning is a form of scaffolding where students work in groups on specific tasks. Each member has the responsibility to learn and accomplish individually while also having the responsibility of group success. Cooperative learning aids students in practicing communication skills, problem solving, and critical thinking.

Group Reflection and Self Assessment: These are valuable learning tools for both the students and the teacher that should be done during and at the end of the unit. During the unit, I dedicate some of the class's daily journal entry topics to answering reflective questions about what they are reading, thinking, and learning. This helps both me and the students have a clearer picture of their progress and needs. At the end of a unit, I give students a teacher made "Group Reflection/Self Assessment" report to rate and explain their achievement, effort, organization, and teamwork. I use this as a small part of their grade.

Modeling Writing: Modeled writing is a scaffold that helps students move toward writing independently using targeted skills. The students watch and listen while the teacher creates a written piece in front of them, sharing her thinking and decision-making process aloud.

Gradual Release of Responsibility Model (Gradual Release): Gradual Release is a style of teaching in which activity moves slowly from being completely teacher centered to completely students centered as students become more confident and competent at the task.

The lesson usually starts with the teacher modeling a task. Then the teacher models, but gets help from the class as a whole. Then, the students do the task in groups, with the teacher circulating to help those who are struggling. Finally, the students complete the task independently.

Exit Ticket: An exit ticket is formative assessment tool given at the end of lesson. It can be given daily or weekly and is used by teachers to assess how well students understood what they learned in class.

Classroom Activities

Lesson 1: What is speculative fiction?

Time: 60-90 Minutes

Materials:

1. A document camera
2. An overhead projector
3. Student journals
4. Speculative Fiction Mind Web (Appendix A)
5. Exit tickets (can be scrap paper)

Objective:

Students will be able to critically discuss the concepts of speculative fiction and futurism in collaborative discussions in order to build on each others ideas and express their own clearly.

Standard:

CC.1.5.7.A Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions, on grade-level topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

Procedure:

Introduction/Accessing background knowledge:

Have this journal entry on the board when students come in:

Read these definitions carefully.

Speculative (adj.): 1. based on guessing rather than knowledge 2. marked by questioning or curiosity

Visionary (adj.): usually describing a person who thinks about or plans the future with imagination or wisdom

Fiction (noun): false, invented, or imaginary

Futurist (noun): 1. one who studies and predicts the future, especially on the basis of current trends 2. one who finds meaning or fulfillment in the future rather than in the past or present

In your journal, write down these words:

1. Speculative fiction
2. Visionary fiction
3. Futurist

Under each word/phrase, list all the words, phrases, sentences, and images that come to mind when you think of that word/phrase. Write everything you can think. Try to come up with a long list.

Reflection of a word:

Have students get into a circle with their journals. Go around the circle and have students share what they wrote down for speculative fiction. They can share none, some, or all of what they wrote, even if it was already said. Model first. Take notes. Go around a second time to see if the people who passed want to go now and if anyone thought of anything new. Summarize the sharing for the class, pulling together the main themes brought up in everyone's reflections. Repeat this process with visionary fiction and futurist.

Mini-lesson:

-So what books that you know of fall into speculative fiction?

-But, I thought that was _____ genre? Can it be both?

Pass out Speculative Fiction Mind Web (Appendix A).

Read top and fill in key themes together using the overhead projector with the words you summarized from the reflection on a word.

Guide students in coming up with the genres, key components and examples from their previous reading:

- Science fiction: people impacted by science and technology, time travel, robots, the danger of technology or the benefit of technology: *A Wrinkle in Time, Divergent, The Hunger Games, Star Wars*

- Fantasy: fantastical creatures, characters from mythology, magic, quests, person being taken from everyday life: *Harry Potter, Percy Jackson, Eragon, Lord of the Rings, Game of Thrones*

- Dystopian: society that is dehumanizing and frightening, government controls, main character rebels against society: *The Giver, Harrison Burgeron, The Hunger Games, Divergent, Maze Runner*

- Horror/Scary/Supernatural: ghosts, demons, vampires, werewolves, fear of the unknown: *Goosebumps, Steven King novels*

- Superhero: setting usually urban, character with superpower, supervillain, secret identity, sidekick, struggle with identity, good vs. evil: Superman, Black Panther, Spiderman

-Can a book fall under two genres?

-What do visionary fiction and futurist have to do with speculative fiction? (Reread summaries of reflection of a word.)

-What are the purposes/benefits of reading/writing speculative fiction? (Pair/share).

Conclude:

Remind student of the story *The People Could Fly* from our folktale unit and have students summarize. Ask, “What made this a folktale?”

Think-Pair-Share- What makes it also speculative fiction?

Formative Assessment:

Exit Ticket: In your own words, what is speculative fiction?

Lesson 2: *The People Could Fly*

Time: 60-90 Minutes

Materials:

1. A document camera
2. An overhead projector
3. Student journals
4. Speculative Fiction Mind Web for each student (Appendix A)
5. *The People Could Fly* picture book.
6. Copies of *The People Could Fly* text for each student.
7. Exit tickets (can be scrap paper)

Objective:

Students will be able to read and critically discuss a speculative fiction story in order to identify concepts of speculative fiction and futurism.

Standard:

CC.1.5.7.A Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions, on grade-level topics, texts, and issues, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly.

CC.1.3.7.C Analyze how particular elements of a story or drama interact and how setting shapes the characters or plot.

Procedure:

Introduction/Accessing background knowledge:

-What did we learn about yesterday?

Review good answers from Exit Tickets and clear up misconceptions from Exit Tickets without revealing who wrote what.

Review summaries from reflection on a word.

Have students take out their Speculative Fiction Mind Webs and review with their reading partners.

-What question did we end with yesterday? (Is *The People Could Fly* speculative fiction? How?) Review answers.

Today we are going to dive deeper into that question.

Shared Reading

Review *The People Could Fly*, read it once through quickly as shared reading. Stop to point out the elements of folktale.

Close reading

Give out (or have students take out) student copies of the text of *The People Could Fly*. Read through the text slowly with a copy projected. Keep referring back to the Speculative Fiction Mind Web. Annotate the text for elements of speculative fiction.

Examples:

1. flight and magic: fantasy
2. slavery – a society that is dehumanizing and frightening: dystopia
3. Master, Driver, and Overseer – government controls: dystopia
4. Toby – rebel: dystopia
5. Flying away to freedom – person being taken away from everyday life: fantasy

Conclusion:

Pair-Share – What makes this story dystopian? What makes this story fantasy? Any other genres? Which do you think it is the most? Why?

How is this story visionary?

How is this story futurist?

Formative Assessment:

Exit Ticket: In your opinion, is *The People Could Fly* more dystopian or more fantasy? Give at least one piece of evidence from the story and at least one piece of evidence from your Speculative Fiction Mind Web.

Lesson 3: Introducing Book Circle Books: Book Pass

Time: 60-90 Minutes

Materials:

1. A document camera
2. An overhead projector
3. Student Journals

4. Speculative Fiction Mind Web for each student (Appendix A)
5. Copies of each literature circle book:
 - a. *The House of Diers Drear*
 - b. *Kiranmala and the Kingdom Beyond: The Serpent's Secret*
 - c. *The Jumbies*
 - d. *Love Sugar Magic: A Dash of Trouble, Race to the Sun*
 - e. *A Dragon's Guide to the Care and Feeding of Humans*
 - f. *Sal and Gabi Break the Universe*
 - g. *Race to the Sun*
6. Copies of Book Pass Review Sheet for each student (in the appendix of *Mini Lessons for Literature Circles*, Harvey & Steineke, 2004)
7. Ballots for choosing books (can be scrap paper)
8. Exit tickets (can be scrap paper)

Objective:

Students will be able to infer and draw generalizations about speculative fiction novels in order to determine which one is best suited for their individual needs.

Standard:

CC.1.5.7.A Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions, on grade-level topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

CC.1.3.7.B Cite several pieces of textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences, conclusions, and/or generalizations drawn from the text.

CC.1.4.7.N Engage and orient the reader by establishing a context and point of view and introducing a narrator and/or characters.

Diversity 8 DI.6-8.8 I am curious and want to know more about other people's histories and lived experiences, and I ask questions respectfully and listen carefully and nonjudgmentally.

Procedure:

Introduction/Accessing background knowledge:

Have this journal entry on the board when students come in:

Review this definition:

•Myth: (noun) a traditional story, especially one about the early history of a people or explaining some natural or social phenomenon, and typically involving supernatural beings or events

Two days ago, we learned that myths can be considered fantasy, which falls under the category of speculative fiction. Mrs. Volin's professor says that, "All people need new mythologies." What does that mean to you? Do you agree with her statement? Why or why not? What would your new mythology look like?

Pair-Share journal entries.

What do you consider a new mythology for all people or some people?

Mini-Lesson (Adapted from *Mini-Lessons for Literature Circles*, Harvey & Steineke, 2004)

Have stations of seven seats with each seat having a different literature circle book.

Hand out the Book pass review sheet.

Explain procedure to students:

When you sit down, grab the book in front of you. When I say, "go," start reading at the beginning of chapter one. Read as far as you can until I say, "stop," which will be in two minutes. When you stop, you have thirty seconds to fill out the review sheet, so you will remember which books you liked and why. Then, you will pass your book to the left, and repeat. We will repeat until everyone has sampled all seven books. I'll be calling out time to keep you on schedule. Follow my directions or you will get behind.

Guided Practice: Students follow the procedure the teacher explained as you call out time. Keep an eye on the tables, and usher kids along.

When students have finished previewing all choices, have students go back to their seats and write down their four favorite books in order on the ballot.

Collect ballots before concluding discussion.

Conclusion:

What openings were interesting and why?

Look at the Speculative Fiction Mind Web. Which book do you think falls into which category? Why?

How are these books new mythologies for all people?

Formative Assessment:

Exit Ticket: Pick your favorite book from today. Tell me the title and then answer one of these questions in detail:

1. How does the author of this book hook the reader in the first chapter?
2. How does this book answer the call for all people to have new mythologies?

Resources

Reading List:

Barber, T., Anderson, R., Dery, M., & Renée Thomas, S. (2018), *25 Years of*

Afrofuturism and Black Speculative Thought: Roundtable with Tiffany E. Barber, Reynaldo Anderson, Mark Dery, and Sheree Renée Thomas. *TOPIA: Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies*, (39) 136-144.

This article provides an introductory understanding and discussion of Afrofuturism, especially in how it pertains to speculative fiction.

Christensen, L. (2009) *Teaching for Joy and Justice: Re-Imagining the Language Arts Classroom*. Milwaukee, WI: Rethinking School, Ltd.

This book is about teaching reading and writing with a social justice perspective. It has a chapter on themed literature circles.

Daniel, H. & Steineke (2004) *Mini-lessons for Literature Circles*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann. *This book teaches students skills to have meaningful literature circles.*

Emory University [Username]. (2016, October 10) *Speculative Blackness: The Future of Race in Science Fiction* [Video File]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Kn8KKZuhws>

This talk introduced me to early feminist science fiction writers, notably, Virginia Hamilton.

Freire, P. (1993) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. M. B. Ramos, Trans.). Continuum Publishing Company. (Original work published 1973)

Ideas from this book were formative in developing my purpose as social justice educator.

Grigsby Bates, K. (Producer). (2020, January 29) *Books For Your Mind, Belly And Soul*. [Audio podcast]. <https://www.npr.org/2020/01/28/800589806/books-for-your-mind-belly-and-soul>.

This podcast interviews an author of new teen fantasy novels and discusses the need for teens to have dark speculative fiction written by and about people of color.

Imarisha, W., Brown, A. M., & Thomas, S. R., (Eds.) (2015) *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements*. Oakland, CA: AK Press.

The introduction explains the link between and the importance of black speculative fiction in the social justice movement. The outro explains the process of futuristic world building I adapt for the writing section of my unit.

Jones, S. P. (2020) Ending Curriculum Violence. *Teaching Tolerance* (26) <https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/spring-2020>

This article explains how schools and teachers unknowingly perpetrate curricular violence on students of color. While it does not specifically name the reading of texts where people of color are invisible or othered, I make this connection in the rationale for my unit.

Kelly, M. J. & Clausen-Grace, N. (2007) *Comprehension Shouldn't Be Silent: From Strategy Instruction to Student Independence*. International Reading Association.

This book has a great chapter on Literature Circles explaining the benefits and potential problems. It also provides strategies and resources for successful literature circles.

School District of Philadelphia (2018) Students by Primary Home Language [Table]. Retrieved

from <https://dashboards.philasd.org/extensions/philadelphia/index.html#/enrollment>

This chart gave me information on the ethnic makeup of my school for context.

School District of Philadelphia (2018) Students by Race/Ethnicity, Gender, and Age [Table].

Retrieved from

<https://dashboards.philasd.org/extensions/philadelphia/index.html#/enrollment>

This chart gave me information on the ethnic makeup of my school for for context.

Spiegelman, Art (1973) *Maus I: A Survivor's Tale: My Father Bleed History*. New York: Pantheon Books.

I mention this as being a shared reading book that has been part of the seventh grade curriculum for years.

Strieb, L. Carini, P., Kanevsky, R. & Wice, B. (2012). *Prospect's Descriptive Processes: The Child, The Art of Teaching, The Classroom and School: Revised Edition*. (M. Himley, Ed). The Prospect Archives and Center for Education and Research.

This book is a how-to for the reflective practices developed for teacher learning cooperatives by the Prospect Center. I used it as a reference for how to conduct a reflection on a word.

Thomas, E. (2018) *The Dark Fantastic: Race and the Imagination from Harry Potter to the Hunger Games*. New York: NYU Press.

This book lays out the principles of the dark fantastic cycle of spectacle, hesitation, violence, and haunting in traditional speculative fiction. It also posits that this symbolic violence must be interrupted through the emancipation of new narratives.

Thomas, E. (2017) *Imagine Yourself a Young Reader in the Margins: #OwnVoices: Three Takes*. *School Library Journal* Retrieved from, <https://www.slj.com/?detailStory=imagine-yourself-a-young-reader-in-the-margins-ownvoices-three-takes>

This article discusses the dire consequences for the literacy of Black and Brown students not seeing or seeing a warped view of themselves in books and popular media.

Thomas, E. (2018) *Toward a Theory of the Dark Fantastic: The Role of Racial Difference in Young Adult Speculative Fiction and Media*. *Journal of Language and Literacy Education*, 14(3), 1-10.

This article lays out the principals Thomas explores in her later book, explaining how the speculative fiction cannon either makes people of color invisible or makes them the evil "other".

Thomas, E. & Stornaiuolo, A. (2019, March 15) *Race, Storying, and Restorying: What can we learn from Black fans?* *Transformative Works and Cultures* (29)

This paper explores the restorying done through fan fiction by young Black fans left out of popular speculative fiction.

Toliver, S. E. & Miller, K. (2019, June 12) *Imaginative Spaces and Connecting Lines: SFF and the CSK*. *The Horn Book, Inc.* Retrieved from,

<https://www.hbook.com/?detailStory=imaginative-spaces-and-connecting-lines-sff-and-the-csk>

This article discusses the importance of Black science fiction/fantasy to children's literature about the black experience. It urges the keepers of the cannon, such as the Coretta Scott King Awards, to start recognizing Black science fiction/fantasy novels.

Toliver, S. E. & Miller, K. (2019) (Re)Writing Reality: Using Science Fiction to Analyze the World. *English Journal*, 108(3), 51-59.

This article outlines Toliver's and Millers' work to bring science fiction in to community-based writing program as a way to empower young writers as agents of change in their community.

Williams, K. (2013, April 13) *Demanding the Impossible: Walidah Imarisha Talks About Science Fiction and Social Change*. Bitch Media.

<https://www.bitchmedia.org/post/demanding-the-impossible-walidah-imarisha-talks-about-science-fiction-and-social-change>

This article reviews the book, Octavia's Brood, and discusses why black speculative fiction is important and necessary as visionary fiction to bring us hope in a dark reality.

Student Resources:

Baptiste, T. (2016). *The Jumbies*. Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Young Readers.

This is a book option for speculative fiction literature circles. It is an upper elementary fantasy novel involving creatures from Trinidadian folktales. It takes place on a Caribbean island and has all Black characters.

DasGupta, S., & To, V. (2018). *Kiranmala and the Kingdom Beyond: The Serpent's Secret*. New York: Scholastic Press.

This is a book option for speculative fiction literature circles. It is an upper elementary fantasy novel involving creatures from folktales from West Bengal, India. The protagonist is a middle school girl who lives in New Jersey but immigrated from India as a young child.

Cervantes, J. C. (2018). *The Storm Runner*. New York: Disney-Hyperion.

This is a book option for speculative fiction literature circles. It is teen fantasy novel about Mayan mythology with a male modern day American middle school protagonist of Mayan descent.

Chokshi, R. (2018). *Aru Shah and the End of Time*. New York: Disney-Hyperion.

This is a book option for speculative fiction literature circles. It is teen fantasy novel about Hindu mythology with a female modern day American middle school protagonist of Indian descent.

Deutsch, B. (2012) *Hereville: How Mirka Got Her Sword*. Amulet Paperbacks.

This is a book option for speculative fiction literature circles

Elliot, Z. (2018) *Dragons in a Bag*. New York: Random House Books for Young Readers.

This is a book option for speculative fiction literature circles.

Hamilton, V. (1968) *The House of Dies Drear*. New York: Macmillan.

This is a book option for speculative fiction literature circles. It is an upper elementary school mystery/ghost novel with an African-American child as the protagonist.

Hamilton, V., Dillon, L., & Dillon, D. (2007). *The People Could Fly: The Picture Book*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

This is an illustrated version of a classic African-American folktale that is good to start the unit. The story can also be classified as fantasy or Afrofuturism.

Hernandez, C. (2019) *Sal and Gabi Break the Universe*. New York: Disney-Hyperion.

This is a book option for speculative fiction literature circles. It is a teen science fiction novel with a modern day Cuban-American middle school boy as the protagonist.

Lin, G. (2019) *Where the Mountain Meets the Moon*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

This is a book option for speculative fiction literature circles. It is an upper elementary school fantasy novel about Chinese myths and folktales with a Chinese child as the protagonist.

Mbalia, K. (2019) *Tristan Strong Punches a Hole in the Sky*. New York: Disney-Hyperion.

This is a book option for speculative fiction literature circles. It is teen fantasy novel about African and African-American folktales with an African American male modern day middle school protagonist.

Meriano, A. (2018) *Love Sugar Magic: A Dash of Trouble*. New York: Walden Pond Press.

This is a book option for speculative fiction literature circles. It is an upper elementary fantasy novel involving Mexican folklore surrounding magic and The Day of the Dead. The protagonist is a middle school Mexican-American girl who lives in Texas.

Roanhorse, R. (2019) *Race to the Sun*. New York: Disney-Hyperion.

This is a book option for speculative fiction literature circles. It is a teen fantasy novel about Navajo mythology with a modern day American middle school protagonist of Navajo descent.

Yep, L. & Ryder, J. (2015) *A Dragon's Guide to the Care and Feeding of Humans*. New York. Crown Books for Young Readers.

This is a book option for speculative fiction literature circles. It is an upper elementary fantasy novel. The protagonist is a female dragon from China. It takes place in San Francisco, CA. The human characters' race/ethnicities are not named, but they are presumably white.

Appendix

Standards:

Reading Literature

CC.1.3.7.A Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text; provide an objective summary of the text.

CC.1.3.7.B Cite several pieces of textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences, conclusions, and/or generalizations drawn from the text.

CC.1.3.7.C Analyze how particular elements of a story or drama interact and how setting shapes the characters or plot.

Speaking and Listening

CC.1.5.7.A Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions, on grade-level topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

Writing

CC.1.4.7.M Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events.

CC.1.4.7.N Engage and orient the reader by establishing a context and point of view and introducing a narrator and/or characters.

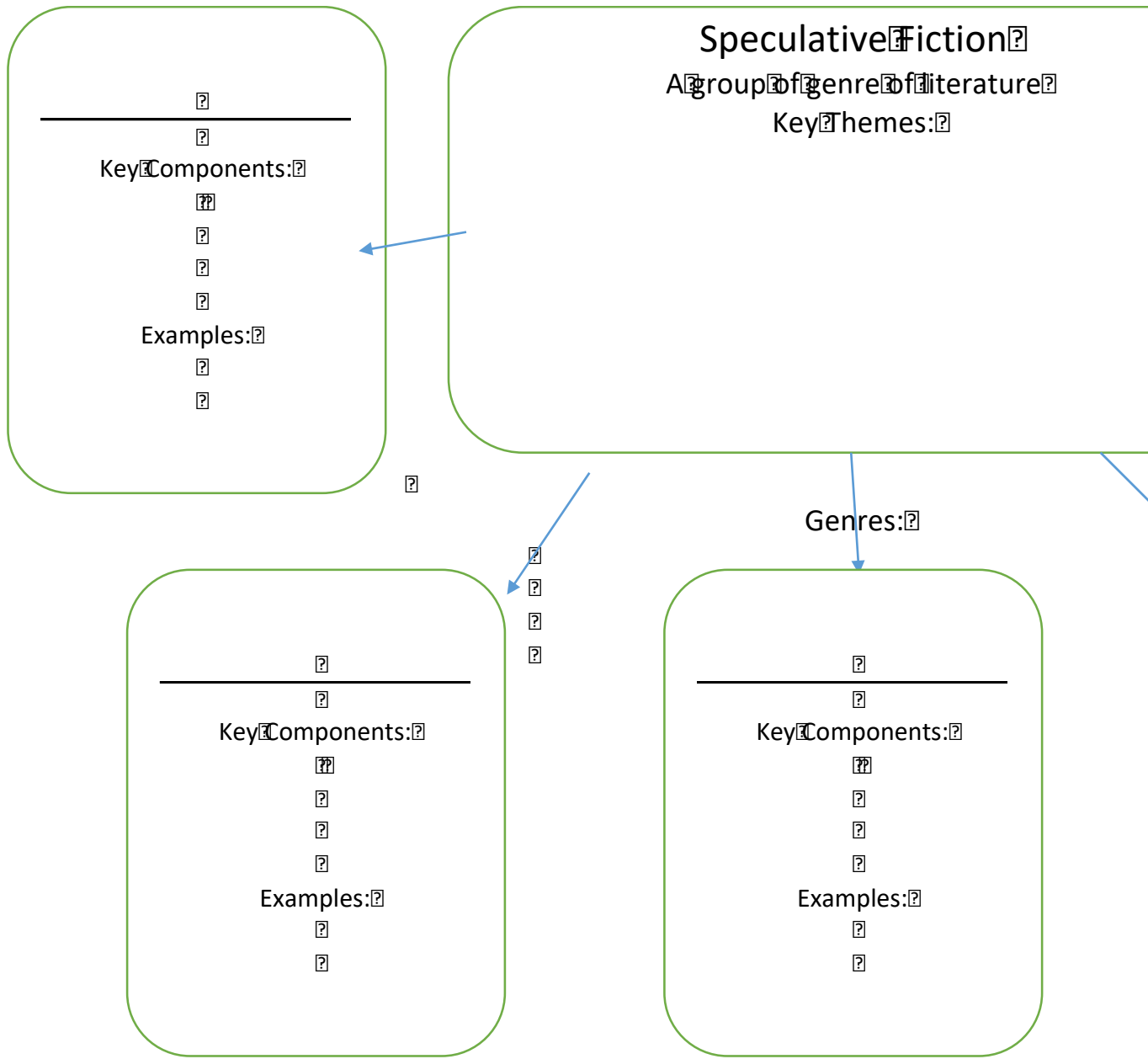
CC.1.4.7.O Use narrative techniques such as dialogue, description, and pacing to develop experiences, events, and/or characters; use precise words and phrases, relevant descriptive details, and sensory language to capture the action and convey experiences and events.

CC.1.4.7.P Organize an event sequence that unfolds naturally and logically, using a variety of transition words, phrases, and clauses to convey sequence and signal shifts from one time frame or setting to another; provide a conclusion that follows from and reflects on the narrated experiences and events.

Teaching Tolerance Social Justice Standards

Diversity 8 DI.6-8.8 I am curious and want to know more about other people's histories and lived experiences, and I ask questions respectfully and listen carefully and nonjudgmentally.

Teacher Created Materials



Appendix A

Speculative Fiction Literature Circles
Title of Book

Group Members:

Student Name
Student Name
Student Name
Student Name
Student Name

Assignment Dates (You must have read these pages and fill out the literature circle training template by this date.):

Friday, 5/3 Page 1-29 Pages per day_____

Thursday, 5/9 Page 31-58 Pages per day_____

Thursday, 5/18 Page 69-91 Pages per day_____

Wednesday, 5/22 Page 93-122 Pages per day_____

Tuesday, 5/28 Page 123-End Pages per day_____

Discussion Leader:

Week 1: _____

Week 2: _____

Week 3: _____

Week 4: _____

Week 5: _____