In the Teacher as Everyday Hero course, we ask our Master in the Art of Teaching (MAT) students to write stories of their work in the classroom. One of our MAT student/teachers found a way to make reading the absorbing escape it should be—employing an almost “if you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em…” approach, that uses her students’ obsession with technology as a way to engage them.

Presenting a book for in-class reading to sixth graders can be a big challenge in this sophisticated world, where young students’ attention spans are stretched to the limits, due to a host of technological distractions. After all, how can a paper-bound book compete with the multi-dimensional nature of iPads, iPods, and smart phones? This savvy teacher achieved student buy-in through technology, and chose material that swerves off the traditional path a bit.

Names have been changed to protect the identities of the students, but we’re certain this story will expose a love for teaching that is truly inspirational. Let us know what you think and how you help your students find escape through reading.

-Diane S. Brown, Ph.D.
Academic Director, Master in the Art of Teaching Program, Marygrove College

Finding Escape.

As the recess-drenched stench of crisply ironed polo shirts lingers in the air, and hands rush to tuck the edges of shirts back into the belted waistbands of conforming plaid skirts and khaki pants, the sixth graders of St. Patrick School begin to infiltrate the double doors of the school. These doors are supposed to lead to learning, to reverence, to respect, and to responsibility, but to the mob of sweaty-haired boys and girls, huffing and puffing their way through, these doors lead away from the last minutes of freedom, away from the fresh-flowered spring air, away from energetic bursts of energy finding their form in parking lot soccer, in playground races, and in daily rehashing of gossip. These doors lead the sixty students into the confines of thick textbooks, monotone lectures, concrete walls, and rigid private school regulations.

Standing there, watching each of these students wipe the last tinges of recess-fun freedom from their brows, one student’s eyes meet mine— Amanda’s eyes seem to scream, “I.Just.Want.To.Escape. Help.Me.” It was in that moment, somewhere between the lunch dismissal bell and the classroom tardy bell, that I became determined to find a way to help these kids find themselves escaping and falling in love with a new world—a new world within the school walls, that doesn’t chase away their last minutes of freedom, doesn’t chase away the fresh-flowered spring air, and doesn’t chase away their last minutes of recess play, but instead helps them find escape and imagination in ways that they never imagined. How was I going to do this? The perfect book— I thought to myself. I will have to use what I love, reading, to create a new universe for
each of my sixth graders, and I knew just the right book—The Hunger Games by New York Times bestselling author Suzanne Collins.

Creating a new world can be challenging, and creating a new world for over sixty students took some planning time, convincing my principal, and searching for the perfect ‘banned’ book. The book is controversial due to the violence that ensues—it is our world infiltrated with reality television and a power-hungry government times five—but I was able to enlist my principal by producing a rather large file that discussed the use of the novel in terms of its critique on desensitization based on video games and reality television. I figured the story of a dystopian world (much like the students’ feelings toward their school world) that had action, and a speck of love might be just the ticket to help each student—non-reader, reader, boy, girl—to fall in love with a new world, and to help stop each student from wavering when entering through the double doors on his or her way from freedom. And, so, begins the story of a new world—a world that every English teacher dreams of—a world where every student falls in love with a book.

“Yeah, this is so lame. Why do we all have to read the same books? I HATE reading—the books from school are always stupid or old,” Amanda’s hiss rolls from her pre-disposed ‘annoyed’ purse of the lips—the one she wears whenever she doesn’t like what is going to happen to her in class.

“Well, you know that I aim to make your lives miserable, so I picked the absolute worst book that I could find, and was just wishing that, especially you two—Amanda and Kyle—would dislike it; you two will have to tell me if I did a good job on my mission as we read it,” I say in a sarcastic, yet laughable manner with my eyes lingering on the two students, and then, when I am sure I have their attention—give a quick wink.

Amanda is the first to speak up (again), “Don’t worry Mrs. Smith—we will be sure to let you know—you haven’t failed us yet.” I brushed off the sarcastic rude remark—instead of giving her the usual write-up—I was determined to make this work. New world… here we come—I kept repeating in my head. I can do this.

“Good,” I spout—“lets move into a circle on the floor—Amanda and Kyle, please be sure to pick up a bean bag or a lounge chair—I want you to be as comfortable as possible while we read another book that I am sure you will dislike.” They reluctantly smile, as they now have free range as they quickly race to the corner of the room to whisk the comfiest chairs in the classroom to sit in their usual positions, in the back of the circle—farthest away from me; they think I haven’t noticed, but they have tried to non-chalantly hide their iPods in their pockets, ready to ‘plug-in’ the instant my eyes are in the book. They are going to be so shocked, I think to myself—and I begin to try to catch every student’s attention—we won’t actually start reading today, but I want to hook them just enough to see if I can get each student wanting to read more.

First, Marisa, my ultra-helper student, has kindly planned to shut the lights off, leaving only the faint glow of lamps that are huddled in every corner of my classroom—just enough light to watch and read. Then, I press the play button and a YouTube video flashes onto the projection screen—a trailer to the novel—created by the author (such a nifty little new tool for teachers)—has just helped me in my first step to creating a new world. All of my students’ eyes are plastered to the screen, and the classroom speakers are blaring: “Could you survive on your own, in the wild, with everyone fighting against you? Welcome to The Hunger Games. Twenty-four are forced to enter. Only

I was feeling very confident with my book choice, I held my head high, and diligently passed individual books out to each student; however, as I vigorously mentioned that we would be reading this as a whole-class novel, desolate moans filled the air, followed by sighs, and heads falling into clasped hands—clearly the world was going to end, the dreaded whole-class novel had reared its ugly head. Specifically two students, Amanda and Kyle, both lounging in their desks, backs leaning to one side of their seats, legs sprawled out encompassing the floor beneath their desks, smirked and rolled their eyes as they tossed the new books into their backpacks.

“Looks boring, not reading it,” mumbles Kyle, an avid non-reader and anti-language arts class student.

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Just then the room is darkened further as the screen blackens—while the video is playing, each student receives a strip of paper—they have just entered “the Reaping,” which they will learn is a significant plot event from the book—and playing the roles of the main characters are Amanda as Katniss, and Kyle as Peeta! In that moment, I see something different in each of my students, but specifically in Amanda and Kyle—their iPods have remained untouched in their pockets, and their mouths have remained quiet (an amazing moment); now I just need to see if I can keep them interested tomorrow; today’s slight step into a new world has ended. As the bell rings, my usual readers plead to keep the books and begin reading, which gives me a little ray of hope; however, most of my other students turn over their novels to a Tupperware box and leave without another word. I hope this works—this will work, I think to myself. “See you tomorrow guys—enjoy your night,” I say upon the students exiting the room.

Day Two. Task Two:
I want to see what my students’ reactions are as we actually begin to read— I think to myself, Well, at least I have lunch before entering the realm of trying to build a new world again, but then I am all too quickly interrupted by the end of the lunch bell—off I go—’To boldly go where no man has gone before…” lingers in my mind, and I smirk to myself and then grab my lunch bag and make the trek from one end of the school to my classroom.

As I turn to enter my classroom, I realize that the little munchkins have let themselves in, and closed the door—locking it behind them. Ugh, this is not the right way to start this off—not a good sign. I grab my key and slowly turn the lock—hoping that no one is having a mosh pit in the middle of my classroom. When I enter the room, I see a miraculous sight—twenty four sixth grade students—every one of them—even Amanda—even Kyle—lounged, in a tight-knit circle, books in hand, ready to read. READY TO READ! “Can we just read today?”—they all ask in unison—“it looks good…” My face, I am sure, looked as though it had seen a ghost—my hands had fallen to my sides, and a smile began to emerge—

“Really?” I question—“You guys want to read for the whole ninety minutes—in a whole-class book?”

“Yes,” they say, some louder than others—“Please read it…” they nudge on, showing me that they have picked up their books from the bin. They were having a ‘sit-in’ to show me that they wanted to escape into this new world, and I was going to lead them there, page by page.

Standing there, watching each of these students plead to read, one student’s eyes met mine—Amanda’s eyes seem to scream, “Help.Me.Escape.— Show me a new world,” and it was in that moment, somewhere between the lunch dismissal bell and the classroom tardy bell, that I became determined to forever find a way to help these kids, and every kid that finds himself or herself in my classroom, to escape and fall in love with a new world— the world of reading, where freedom comes in any form desired.

“Mrs. Smith” is a sixth grade English teacher in Michigan. She has been teaching for five years and will receive her MAT degree in Spring, 2011.

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