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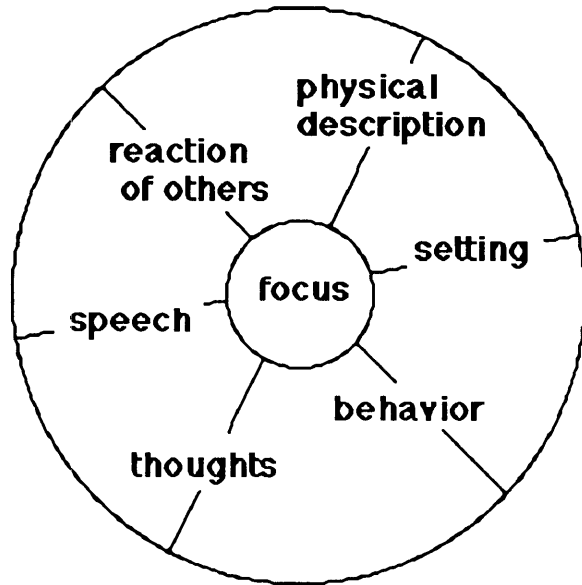
READING: THE CONFERENCES

Mary Ann Davies

**National Middle School Association
17th Annual Conference
November 1990**

One of the presentations at the annual conference of the Middle School Association, held in Long Beach in November, was titled "Character wheels: A reading and writing model for middle school students." Catherine Gourley, from Field Publications, shared a paradigm she designed for helping students identify the cause/effect moments in a story. She discussed the wheel model, its emphasis on process writing and critical thinking skills, and demonstrated its implementation.

Characterization comprises one critical element of fiction, as it often distinguishes good literature from poor. Young adolescents usually select their reading material based on the characters. They are more interested in exploring *who* they want to be, rather than *what* they want to be. The wheel provides a model for focusing on characterization. The character wheel contains six spokes corresponding to different types of characterization. The spokes include physical description, setting, behavior, thoughts, speech, and reaction of others.



The hub of the wheel is a character, a personality, a scene or an object. "The nucleus word triggers memories, emotions, and images, which the student records as quickly as possible." This process of clustering and rapidly generating word associations stimulates creativity, evokes prior knowledge, and provides a framework for examining character development. The wheel serves as an effective tool for pre-writing or for analyzing stories read. Gourley suggests that students first practice using the wheel to create their own characters before applying the model to literature. As a pre-writing activity, an unusual object or picture provides an effective hub and a concrete stimulus for generating images and emotions.

A model of the character wheel illustrates its use. Initially, students find it easiest to begin with the *physical description* spoke. Using the nucleus word (or object), students describe it employing all five senses. Encourage

image evoking descriptions – colorful, specific, and sensory. They list under the spoke labeled *physical description* any thoughts that emerge using the clustering technique. As students become more comfortable using the character wheel, they can begin with any spoke on the wheel they choose.

The second spoke allows students to create a *setting* for the character. They generate a time and place. The ideas recorded under this spoke interact with and reflect the thoughts contained under physical description. The *behavior* spoke requires students to make their character move. In moving or doing something, the character may shift settings and/or a conflict may emerge.

As students develop a cluster of ideas around the *thought* spoke, they need to reflect on what they wrote under the other spokes. Students generate ideas related to what the character might be thinking. For example: “If you were in this setting, what would you be thinking?” or “If you saw someone acting this way, what would you guess was going through their minds?”

Under the *speech* spoke, students describe what the character says and how it is said. Finally, students link the character’s physical description, thoughts and actions to the reactions of others. The process of using the wheel fosters the development of critical thinking skills. Students learn to compare and contrast, use sensory details for descriptions, select relevant details, create supporting details, recognize cause and effect relationships, draw inferences from visual clues, reason logically, predict outcomes, order events, and read critically.

Gourley also views the wheel as a tool to motivate students to read. She suggests having students read a story and then use the wheel to go on a character scavenger hunt. Different groups could examine different characters. The same process could be used as a pre-reading activity to generate interest. Conference participant response to this presentation was positive. The strategy is a technique likely to promote student enjoyment of the reading and writing processes.

1. A character wheel is a right brain, pre-writing activity that can increase a student's understanding and enjoyment of literature. This simple model encourages students to create their own interesting characters-in-conflict and helps them to analyze character development in the stories they read.

2. By constructing a character wheel, student writers begin to recognize how the spokes of the wheel are related. They gain insight to character conflict and motivation. They learn how characterization is first created and then revealed to the reader.

3. Writing and reading have always complemented each other in the junior high school classroom. Character wheels are another example of the effectiveness of this match. By first creating and then identifying examples of characterization through character wheels, students' knowledge and appreciation of good literature can grow.

– Remarks by Catherine Gourley

Mary Ann Davies, the guest editor for this month's column, is a faculty member in the Department of Education and Professional Development at Western Michigan University.

MICHIGAN READING ASSOCIATION CONFERENCE

An upcoming conference of interest to reading educators in the midwest is the Michigan Reading Association Conference, which will be held in Grand Rapids Michigan on March 12, 13 and 14 at the Amway Plaza. Further information about the conference may be obtained by contacting Annena McCleskey, Conference Coordinator, 4791 Sturtevant, Detroit Michigan 48204.