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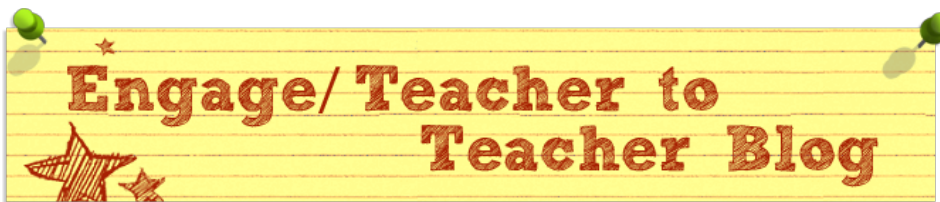
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Teaching Tips: How THE HUNGER GAMES Got a Whole School Reading by Mary Cotillo

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How THE HUNGER GAMES Got a Whole School Reading

By Mary Cotillo

Middle school students are notoriously fickle. Sixth graders are intimidated by the older kids, seventh graders are distracted by anything social, and *nothing* is cool enough for eighth graders.

How, then, does one go about planning an activity to bring together students from all grades? What could possibly appeal to both boys and girls, be appropriate for those ages 11 through 14, and have enough educational value to ensure the support of administration and staff?

How about a book club?

Start with a Good Book

THE HUNGER GAMES is one of THOSE books. You know, the kind you start reading at 6 PM on a Friday night and finish at 2 AM on Saturday morning because, even though you're bleary-eyed and over-tired, you can't find a break in the action to put it down.

At least, that's how it was for me.

And actually, every adult to whom I've recommended THE HUNGER GAMES has returned with similar stories. The school nurse politely interrupted my class to tell me she never thought she'd like it and then read it in two days. The school secretary brought her Kindle to work so she could read when there were minutes-long breaks in her day.

As for student appeal, during our summer reading book talks the first few weeks back to school, I must have had ten kids talk about THE HUNGER GAMES or one of its sequels. So, when our school principal casually mentioned that he'd love to have the whole school reading and talking about the same book, it wasn't hard to pick a title.

Books like THE HUNGER GAMES don't come along often; you've got to capitalize on it while you can. And what better time than when a movie is about to premiere?

Setting the Stage

When the idea for THE HUNGER GAMES book club struck at an eighth grade ELA department meeting, we were faced with a movie premiere in six weeks. Six weeks isn't really enough time to plan, organize, and execute a book club for a school with 523 sixth, seventh, and eighth graders—but we went for it anyway. Movie premieres only happen once, after all.

We began a media campaign within our middle school the week before February vacation, with the idea that students could use the time off to read. Our reading specialist created stationary and a logo, branding our book club and making our posters and name tags and fliers easily recognizable. Literature was posted in bathroom stalls, on lunch



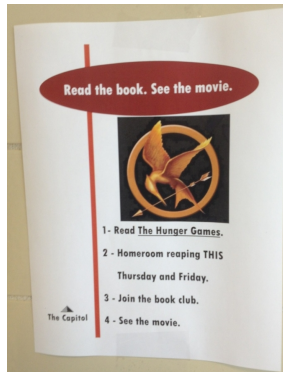
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making our posters and name tags and flyers easy recognizers. Literature was posted in each room, hallway, on lunch room tables, and on every wall of the school:

1. Read the book.
2. Take the quiz.
3. Join the book club.
4. See the movie.



Our school has a video news program that runs every morning. We enlisted the help of students in the drama club to read carefully worded blurbs, addressing the students as "Citizens of Horace Mann Middle School," encouraging them participate in the Reaping ceremony, and wishing the odds to be ever in their favor.

Our principal purchased 25 copies of the book so that students who may not be able to afford one on their own—and who didn't have the time to work the waiting list at the public library—could still participate. Seventh grade girls volunteered their artistic talents and created bubble gum pink, glittery, heart-bedecked posters grilling the reader, "Peeta or Gale?" Copies of the PEOPLE MAGAZINE special edition highlighting the movie were procured, butchered, laminated, and turned into name tags, flyers, posters, and bulletin boards.

While our efforts prior to vacation generated moderate buzz, it was nothing compared to what was to come.

Have High Standards

Because this book club is run by ELA teachers, we didn't want to allow just anyone to join. We decided early that in order to make the club meaningful, members needed to have read the book first. We agreed that a short reading comprehension quiz was the best way to determine if a student had met the

reading requirement.

So, we brainstormed a list of 70 questions. We divided them into categories: characters/pre-games, arena, post-games. Quizzes were comprised of three questions, one from each category, and students had to correctly answer

two out of three to earn their way into the club. The only way students could obtain a permission slip to attend the movie was to first pass the quiz.

On a well-publicized day, a contingent of flamboyantly dressed book lovers invaded homerooms and reading classes to quiz interested students. We ran into quite a few kids who tried to fake a knowledge of the book; one precocious sixth grader admitted to reading a plot summary on Wikipedia because she wanted to join just so she could see the movie. But most of the kids had indeed read and were able to tell us the color of Caesar Flickerman's hair, the history of the Mockingjay pin, the names of the final three tributes, or how Katniss paid homage to Rue.

There were also students who, by the luck of the draw, pulled questions they just couldn't remember the answers to. Since this is a middle school and the goal is to bring book lovers together, not test anyone for memory disorders, I would coax kids along. If they were stumped, and got flustered when I offered more questions, I'd ask them to simply tell me about the book. This revealed a few frauds—kids who'd seen the movie trailer and mentioned Katniss buying a pin for her sister—but more often than not it allowed students to prove their worthiness and I willingly handed over a permission slip.

Don't be Afraid to Dork Out

It takes a certain type of person to be a middle school teacher, and a flair for drama seems to be a common trait. My colleagues and I didn't quiz students who wanted to join, we reaped them. We didn't send messages to students at our school, we addressed them as "Citizens of Horace Mann Middle School." Students who were successfully reaped from their homerooms were "tributes chosen to represent their District." District colors were assigned based on the primary industry—black for District 12 and coal mining, blue for District 4 and fishing—and students were encouraged to dress in their district color for book club events.

When we went from homeroom to homeroom for the reaping, we were dressed as citizens from the capital. Feather boas and wild headgear were worn. Heels clicked from room to room. Even the administration got in on the act—our assistant principal wore a tiara the day of the reaping, and our principal now has a "Head Gamemaker" nameplate on his door.

On Reaping Day, I manipulated my hair into corkscrew curls and spray painted them pink. (I was totally channeling my inner Effie.)

Sit Back and Enjoy

This is the stuff of ELA teacher dreams. I had a Russian immigrant student ask me if the book was really worth reading. I assured him it was. Viktor approached me after February vacation and informed me that THE HUNGER GAMES was the first book he'd read entirely in English, and that he read it in two days. (That story still gives me goose bumps.) He's now working on MOCKINGJAY, the third and final installment in the trilogy.

My eighth grade ELA counterpart told me, tears in her eyes, about a handful of girls who clustered in her doorway during dismissal on Friday. They called her name and, when she looked up, kissed three fingers and held them out to her before heading on their way. The school psychologist asked our reading specialist what she'd done to the kids. When she asked in concern what he meant, he replied that this was the first time in 30 years he's seen children reading during lunch.

Since the book club has taken off, I've seen kids reading in the cafeteria, between classes. I've heard girls bonding over their choice of Peeta or Gale. I've watched eighth grade boys animatedly discuss the series. One young man showed me the new book he's reading, which he bought because it was displayed at a bookstore as similar to THE HUNGER GAMES.

When the smoke cleared and we were able to tally the results, we had 224 students qualify to join the club. That means that 42.8 percent of our school's total population *voluntarily read a book* and were able to prove they did so.

Since then, we've seen and heard about dozens more who are reading THE HUNGER GAMES—not to join the club, not to see the movie, but just because their friends read it and everyone is talking about it and *they don't want to be left out*.

Post Production

There is always more to be done, of course. Yesterday, Monday, March 26th, at 7:45 AM, I loaded 224 middle school book lovers, 10 brightly dressed staff members, and five brave parents into four buses headed for the movie theater. It was a magical experience I'm not likely to forget.

I wasn't sure what exactly to expect from a theater filled with middle schoolers, but I think I was entertained as much by the kids and their reactions as I was by the film. There was giggling at the kisses, gasping at the surprises, crying at the losses, cheering for the victories.

But our adventures didn't end with the rolling of the credits. There will be trivia contests, District talent contests, Cornucopia relay races, and scavenger hunts. We purchased OPI's Capital Colors nail polish to give as prizes, along with Mockingjay pins and posters.

In fact, we have so much more in store, and so much more to do, I'm not sure quite how it will all take shape. But if we can get this far, I'm sure we can see it to the end.

And I know that the odds will be ever in our favor.

Mary Cotillo is an 8th grade ELA teacher at Horace Mann Middle School in Franklin, MA. Mother to two children, she enjoys engaging in light saber battles and hanging out on soccer fields. She earned her National Board Certification in 2009.

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