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Find Their Voices: Navigating the Challenges of Teenage Self-Expression

Rationale

Finding one's voice and expressing oneself can be a challenging journey, and for many people, expressing their inner thoughts and feelings is very difficult because not only do they have to deal with the variability of their inner voice, but they also have to weigh the choice between conformity and individuality. This is especially difficult for young adults as they grow up. During this period, they seek self-identity and self-understanding within a mix of societal expectations, peer pressure, and personal insecurities. These young voices are often silenced for fear of being judged or misunderstood. Additionally, this struggle is compounded by an internal struggle between the desire to be heard and the fear of being vulnerable. At this critical stage of self-discovery, finding one's voice is not just a form of expression but a powerful step towards self-empowerment and affirmation of one's unique place in the world.

I choose to delve into this topic for the Unit of Study because I believe that literature is one of the most important ways to find and express one's voice. Literature that explores the challenges of self-expression provides teen readers with references that reflect the numerous challenges but also triumphs encountered in finding one's voice. By immersing themselves in the protagonists' lives and traveling down similar paths of self-discovery, teens gain a way to empathize deeply with their experiences and learn strategies for expressing their thoughts and feelings. These stories help teens recognize and cultivate their own unique voices and illuminate their path of self-expression. Through this Unit of Study, teens are encouraged to embrace their

individuality, express themselves truthfully, and understand the value of their voice in the human experience.

My centerpiece for students to read is *The Princess Diaries*. *The Princess Diaries*, a compelling story of an ordinary girl discovering her royal heritage, shows a character's journey from being unconfident and unable to express herself to being self-affirming and assertive, providing what it takes to find and confidently express one's voice. It opens a window into the complexities of voice and expression for teens in their unique ways and serves as a medium for emotional and psychological exploration, helping teens on their complex journey to find and express their own voices in the world.

Introducing the Unit

(1) To begin the Unit, students will be asked to reflect on the concepts of “voices” with journal entries; here are the guiding questions:

-Define “voices” in your own words and give at least one example of your “voices.”

-Where do you feel safe expressing your voice? And Why? (Hint: For example, through a diary, close friend or family member, or specific classroom)

-When do you feel that your voices are heard or understood? (Hint: For example, the response you received, your feelings after your sharing, and the reactions of others)

*Purpose: These questions facilitate a deeper comprehension of students' own voices, prompting them to reflect not just on the journey of uncovering their internal voices but also on the triumphs and challenges associated with communicating these voices to the external world.

(2) Then, I want to move on to help students find their voices through an assignment

-Assignment: Write a letter to yourself, approximately 300 words in length. You should begin by addressing your current self. What are your thoughts, feelings, and experiences right

now? And then you can expand on whatever you like to say to yourself. (Hint: you can discuss your dreams or goals for the future, reflect on some special moments in your life, or offer some advice or encouragement for yourself). Notice: This letter should be honest and introspective. This is a conversation with yourself, so feel free to be honest and casual. And you can decide whether you want to share it with me/classmates.

*Purpose: This assignment is designed to help students find their voice through introspective writing. Writing a letter to oneself encourages deep self-reflection and personal expression, two key elements in developing a strong personal voice. It provides a safe space for students to express their thoughts and feelings without fear of judgment from others.

Working Through the Unit

(1) First, I want to start the first few weeks by reading *Princess Diaries* together while guiding students to discover and express their voices using the diary.

-In-Class: I will divide the novel into four main stages: 1. Mia's ordinary life as a teenage girl. 2. The Revelation of Princess. 3. Balancing her life and learning to be a princess. 4. Accept the changes and gain the self-assertiveness. And to make sure students get the reading done, we will use the class time to read the novel together. After finishing reading each stage in class, we will discuss whether Mia's voice is repressed or expressed at each stage within the groups using the following worksheet.

Stage	Quotes	Voices	Explanations
1. Mia's ordinary life as a teenager.	Cite the quote that illustrates her voice.	Identify if her voice is repressed or expressed.	Explain how this quote illustrates her voice being repressed or expressed.

-Homework: Students will start writing their own diary every day, with a suggested minimum of 100-word requirements for each day.

*Purpose: By reading about Mia's journey and writing their own journals, students can draw parallels between their own experiences and Mia's, thus helping themselves form their own voices and self-expression.

(2) After finishing the novel and completing the worksheet, we will start an in-class discussion based on the comparison of Mia's voices during different stages. Here are the guiding questions for the discussion.

-How does Mia's voice at the beginning of the novel differ from her voice at the end?
What specific changes do you notice in her voice?

-What are some key challenges Mia faces that impact her self-expression? How does she overcome these challenges?

-How do the relationships with her family, friends, and peers influence Mia's journey towards self-assertiveness? Are there pivotal moments driven by these relationships significantly changing her voice?

*Purpose: The contrast between the beginning and the end of the protagonist contributes to helping students discover the possibility of achieving self-expression. By analyzing Mia's challenges, students learn strategies for dealing with difficulties in self-expression. Discussing the impact of relationships on Mia's journey emphasizes the role of external factors in shaping one's voice. This guides students to reflect on how their real-life relationships can hinder or facilitate the process of finding and asserting one's voice. Understanding these dynamics helps

students recognize similar factors in their own lives that influence their voice and how to navigate them and achieve self-expression.

Beyond the Text

Going beyond finding one's voice and self-expression, it is crucial to confront the challenges and societal constraints that often limit our ability to fully express our identity and thoughts. In the process of discovering themselves, individuals often encounter obstacles such as cultural norms, societal expectations, and even personal fears that can inhibit or distort their voice. Recognizing and addressing these barriers is an important step in authentically expressing oneself. This includes the internal process of understanding and accepting oneself and the external struggle of asserting one's voice in an environment that may not be conducive to public expression.

- (1) I will introduce the poem "Caged Bird" by Maya Angelou to the class to illustrate this constraint better. First, I will split the class into two and assign half of the class to read the stanzas of the free bird and the other half to read the stanzas of the caged bird.

"Caged Bird" by Maya Angelou

A free bird leaps
on the back of the wind
and floats downstream
till the current ends
and dips his wing
in the orange sun rays
and dares to claim the sky.

But a bird that stalks
down his narrow cage
can seldom see through
his bars of rage
his wings are clipped, and
his feet are tied
so he opens his throat to sing.

The caged bird sings
with a fearful trill
of things unknown
but longed for still

and his tune is heard
 on the distant hill
 for the caged bird
 sings of freedom.

The free bird thinks of another breeze
 and the trade winds soft through the sighing trees
 and the fat worms waiting on a bright dawn lawn
 and he names the sky his own.

But a caged bird stands on the grave of dreams
 his shadow shouts on a nightmare scream
 his wings are clipped and his feet are tied
 so he opens his throat to sing.

The caged bird sings
 with a fearful trill
 of things unknown
 but longed for still
 and his tune is heard
 on the distant hill
 for the caged bird
 sings of freedom.

(2) Then, we will start a group discussion about how the topic of “voices” and

“self-expression” could be found in this poem.

(3) Next, we will divide the class into four groups to analyze the four main elements in this poem and work on the possible meanings these four elements convey.

Group 1: Free Bird	Group 2: Caged Bird	Group 3: Cage	Group 4: Sing
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(4) Each group gives a presentation about the possible meanings behind each element.

(5) Ask students to do a short reflection writing on this poem (around 150 words):

-Do you want to be the free bird or the caged bird? Explain the reasons.

*Purpose: Group discussion and analysis of key elements of the poem encourage collaborative learning and critical thinking and promote students' overall understanding of the poem's themes and symbolism. It also makes connections to broader concepts such as freedom, constraint, and expression. Free responses writing allows students to connect the themes of the poem to their

own voices and self-expressed opinions. This activity improves their literary analysis skills and develops their ability to identify the struggles of self-expression.

YA Novels:

1. *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson: The novel centers on the main character, Melinda Sordino, who becomes a solitary and quiet girl after a traumatic summer vacation event. Throughout the story, Melinda struggles with not being able to express herself and the resulting loneliness. The novel captures her journey to regain her voice and the courage to face her trauma. Through Melinda's experiences, Anderson powerfully explores the themes of "voice" and "self-expression," illustrating the importance of speaking out to heal and empower.
2. *Flowers to Algernon* by Daniel Keyes: This novel follows the life of Charlie Gordon, an intellectually disabled man who undergoes an experimental surgery to improve his intelligence. The novel unfolds in the form of his diary, and as Charlie's intelligence improves, he gains new insights into his past and the world around him, leading to profound insights into who he is and the way others treat him.
3. *We Were Here* by Matt de la Peña: This one follows the journey of a teenager named Miguel as he faces a tragedy caused by himself. Throughout the story, Miguel is placed in a juvenile detention center and then embarks on a journey with two peers to escape to Mexico. Through challenges and self-discovery, Miguel gradually finds his voice through his journaling, recording his thoughts, fears, and growth.
4. *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* by Jeanette Winterson: This semi-autobiographical novel tells the story of Janet, a girl raised in a strict Pentecostal family in England. As Janet comes to understand and accept her sexuality, which conflicts with her religious

upbringing, she starts a journey of self-discovery and rebellion. It's a story about her struggle to find her voice in a society that tries to suppress her individuality and desires.

5. *I'll Give You the Sun* by Jandy Nelson: This novel is about the intertwined lives of twins Noah and Jude. Told from the alternating perspectives of Noah and Jude, the novel explores their respective struggles with identity, love, and grief. Both siblings struggle with deeply personal and family secrets as they work to find and express their unique voices through art and relationships.

Classics:

1. *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker: This seminal work in American literature vividly portrays African-American women's lives in early 20th-century Georgia. It follows sisters Celie and Nettie, who maintain their bond through letters over decades of separation and hardship. The novel, notable for its raw and powerful depictions of domestic and sexual abuse, explores themes of pain, resilience, and empowerment. Walker's compassionate and striking narrative takes readers on a profound journey of redemption and love.

(Summary taken from Goodreads)

2. *Mrs. Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf: A rich depiction of a day in the life of Mrs. Clarissa Dalloway. Engaged in the final touches of party planning, Clarissa's role as a quintessential society hostess belies the depth and complexity of her inner life. Throughout the day, she is immersed in memories, recalling distant moments from her past. (Summary taken from Goodreads) The contrast between her social roles and her rich inner world highlights the difficult journey of communicating one's true self in a world of expectations and conventions. Her memories and reflections exemplify the complex process of finding and asserting her voice.

Ending the Unit:

As we conclude the unit, I will assign an essay to check students' understanding of the unit and their writing skills. This essay serves as a reflective exercise in which students will articulate their insights and takeaways from the unit. Through this essay, students will be able to make connections between the literature we have analyzed and their own writing exercises in finding their own voice and learning to engage in self-expression.

Possible Prompts (The essay should be around 450-500 words:

-Reflect on the letters you wrote to yourself and the entries in your diary. What aspects of your voice do you find most valuable, and do you feel you have successfully achieved self-expression through these writings? Explain your reasoning, focusing on specific elements from your letters and diary that illustrate your journey toward finding and expressing your voice.

-Reflecting on our reading and discussion of *The Princess Diaries*, compose an essay about Mia's journey in discovering and expressing her own voice. Analyze key moments in the novel that highlight her evolution and consider how these instances contribute to her overall journey of self-expression

-Drawing from Maya Angelou's "Caged Bird," compose an essay that explores the representations of voice and the challenges of self-expression as depicted in the poem. Analyze how the poem's imagery, symbolism, and contrasts convey these themes and discuss their broader implications on the human experience of finding one's voice.

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