in comic books, and thinking about the big ideas that are at the hearts of most graphic novels. Perhaps one student expressed this idea best with these words:

"I still think creating graphic novels involves more talent than it involves insights from English classes, and I still would not say I am a person who writes or finds it easy to do. But the kind of work we've been doing with graphica has helped me think about writing and reading as meaning-transfer problems I can figure out, even if I don't know what I want to say or how to say what I mean initially. Just like araphic novel writers use images, perspective, and words to help me understand their stories, I can make choices about how to develop ideas for readers of my essays or how to get my future students (K–3rd graders I hope) to learn through the pictures and words cleverly positioned on our bulletin boards. I'm just happy to realize I can figure out what I want to say . . . and I can figure out how to share my ideas . . . with my essay readers or the students reading my future class bulletin boards.—Student F.

Conclusion

Examining and writing in detail about one graphic text is an effective means for students to show that they've grasped graphica's potential to convey powerful messages and meaning, but this assignment may be best viewed not as a culmination of a unit but as an opening to further exploration. Having first taken stock of their own experiences in graphica, then dabbling in it by rewriting a text, and finally applying indepth analysis to a text, some students may be feeling proud that they had already discovered graphic texts on their own; others may be excited about the possibilities of this new genre they had previously overlooked. And judging from the fresh new covers showing up weekly on library shelves, there's a wide world of graphic texts awaiting them.

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At the time they collaborated on the lessons described above, Kim Ballard was Director of the Writing Center at Western Michigan University, Meghan Dykema was assistant director; and Patrick Love and Daniel Kenzie were teaching developmental writing and working in the Writing Center.

Knowledge and Characters

by Sig Kriebel

his classroom exercise introduces students to the area of philosophy known as *epistemology*— how we know what we know. Students reflect on their own preferred ways of knowing/believing and share and compare their findings with others in a whole-class setting.

Though this type of reflection can be beneficial to students in itself, the particular classroom goal for this activity is for students to apply a deeper understanding to fictional characters in a short story, play, poem, or novel. I use this activity during the study of a piece of fiction, drama, or even poetry with a well-described character, such as Gatsby, Tom Buchanan, or Nick Carraway in *The Great Gatsby*; Huck, Tom Sawyer, or Jim in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*; Romeo and the Friar in *Romeo and Juliet*; or the speaker in an Emily Dickinson poem such as "Some keep the Sabbath going to church."

After spending time examining their own ways of knowing, students are better able to analyze fictional characters and conflicts, and to understand themselves and their friends, parents, and other adults.

I usually weave in parts of this activity with a reading assignment, but to tackle the five steps consecutively, I would allot 5–10 minutes for Step 1, 10 minutes for Step 2, 10–15 minutes for Step 3, and 10–15 minutes for Step 4. I would wait a day to start Step 5, which could take anywhere from 15 minutes to an entire class period.

Step 1: Responding to the Prompt

Ask students to jot a short answer on a half sheet of paper to the question, "What is something you know or believe to be true?" A few examples will help give students the idea:

"I know/believe there will be a full moon tomorrow night."

"I know/believe my car is in need of new shocks."

"I know/believe that Mark Twain's real name was Samuel Langhorne Clemens."

Step 2: Sharing Answers

Tell students that you are going to ask them to share their answers, and that you will be jotting some examples on the board or overhead projector. (For more control over the process you could collect the half sheets and read some sample answers aloud.)

Students' responses are likely to include a range of different **kinds** of answers—answers that illustrate different ways of knowing things, such as knowledge that is based on experience, knowledge based on trust in another source,

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knowledge based on our senses, and so on. The next step will help students identify these different ways of knowing, so if you don't see much of a range among the responses, you can add some of your own to assure a wide array.

Step 3: Follow-Up Question

Next, ask students to look over the list of responses and consider and write down answers to a follow-up question for the answers already listed: "HOW do you know that such-and-such is true?" or "What is your basis for believing such-and-such to be true?"

Give students five minutes for this step and then ask them to call out some of their answers. Answers will vary but will generally fall into categories similar to those listed below. (Also note that some answers could fit into more than one category.)

Personal experience or sensory input (seeing, hearing, remembering, etc.). This would include scientific experiment.

Examples:

"I know/believe I have two feet (because I can see them.)"

"I know/believe that there are natural hot springs in Yellowstone National Park (because I've visited them.)"

"I know/believe that if I stay up late playing computer games I'll fail my math test the next day (because math is my most difficult subject and I've tried that approach before with bad results.)"

Trust in the authority of some other source. This source could be a teacher or public official; a print, radio, TV, or online document; or even hearsay/rumor.

Examples:

"I know/believe that an atom of hydrogen has one proton and one electron (because I learned it in science class.)"

"I know/believe that local restaurant X is going out of business due to embezzlement (because my aunt told me she heard it from a restaurant employee.)"

Religious faith. This may be seen to overlap with other categories, such as "trust in an external authority" or "intuition/a special feeling."

Examples:

"I know/believe that people have souls (because I learned this from my parents and church leaders.)"

"I know/believe that God made the world (because I'm a person of faith and this is what my faith teaches or the Bible says.)"

Intuition, a hunch, a special feeling, etc. Examples:

"I know/believe the mayor is/ is not trustworthy (because I just feel it in my gut.)"

"I know/believe that wearing my lucky earring helps me win more games (because of a feeling and because I have actually won more games when wearing it, and even though I cannot prove the connection, I believe it's there.)"

Common sense, logic, or reason, based on known premises and the laws of logic. Examples:

"I know/believe that a car with no gasoline will not start (because an engine needs fuel to run.)"

"I know that my mom thinks I'm a good driver (because she wouldn't have let me drive my brother and his friends to the mall last weekend if she didn't.)"

As students call out their answers, start grouping them by category on the board or overhead, and ask students to help you group them. If you think your students will benefit from more warm-up to the activity, or if you have English language learners in your class, you may find it helpful to display and talk through additional examples before you ask students to tackle the follow-up question and categorize the examples.

As a class, you could write some additional examples together and talk about the basis for knowing or believing each one. Students could also be allowed to form pairs or small groups for Steps 3 and 4.

The process of grouping answers requires some thought and analysis—students may get the idea fairly quickly, and if so they will be able to help justify the categories, as well as to suggest that some answers belong in more than one category. To provide students with more support, you could list all the answers first, then talk through the categorization process and ask a few questions aloud to illustrate your thought process, such as "Do I remember someone telling me this? Did I read this in a reputable source? Is this something I can verify using my own five senses?"

Step 4: Comparing Ideas

Once students show a basic understanding of these different ways of knowing and believing, ask them to spend a few minutes brainstorming responses to the following questions, individually or with a partner:

- Which ways of knowing do you use most often?
- What are the different contexts or environments in which you are more likely to use particular ways of knowing?

- Are there ways of knowing that you feel more comfortable with? Less comfortable with?
- Are some ways of knowing more effective or appropriate in certain situations? Give some examples.

Once again a short class discussion can be used to share and compare responses. Students recognize that we all have knowledge and beliefs that come to us in different ways, but there are usually some differences among students' preferred ways of knowing. Some students may express more confidence in their intuition, while others may feel more comfortable with knowledge based in logic and common sense; still others may feel the knowledge they trust most is that gained from authority figures or religious traditions.

One point that frequently comes up in our class discussions is that it's hard to label a way of knowing as "right" or "wrong," but that different ways of knowing have contexts in which they may be more or less appropriate and useful. For example, you normally wouldn't rely on your intuition to tell you whether it was time to get your driver's license renewed, but intuition might be useful to inform you if your girlfriend or boyfriend was cheating on you. If you wanted to find out an advanced chemical formula, you might consult a science textbook or web site or science teacher, but you probably wouldn't consult a friend or family member, or expect to use your common sense or find a verse in your Bible to figure it out.

Step 5: Looking at Literature

As the last step, we turn to literature. I ask students to take what they have learned and analyze a character in the work of literature they are currently reading. They are to select a few key interactions or situations in which the character is involved, speculate on what ways of knowing the character is using, and explain what this tells us about the character. I also encourage students to think about why this character might be more likely to use one way of knowing more than another, and how this affects his or her motivations and actions.

This deeper look into characters provides for fascinating class discussion, as students share comments, insights, analysis, and predictions for their characters.

In The Great Gatsby, for instance, students may identify several different epistemologies that emerge among Fitzgerald's memorable characters. Gatsby's passionate insistence that he can "turn back the clock" with Daisy demonstrates belief based on feeling or intuition that can never be substantiated scientifically (and finally fails to materialize in his experience). Tom Buchanan bases his beliefs on external authorities—he has notions about white supremacy based on a contemporary book he's reading, and eventually he "investigates" Gatsby's past by utilizing his network of friends in high places. Nick Carraway makes occasional statements about his own virtues as a narrator based on his past experience and relationships.

Students quickly see that in *Huckleberry Finn*, most of the characters illustrate beliefs based on superstition (a type of faith or trust in external authority with no clear scientific or experiential support). With a little help, they begin to see that Huck himself is more complex: At times he bases his knowledge on sensory input combined with reason or logic, at other times on what adult authority figures have tried to teach him, and at other times on various irrational superstitions. In particular, his developing morality and his grappling with moral dilemmas showcase his shifting epistemology. He wavers back and forth among several bases for belief—his upbringing, his formal education, his immature faith, and his own intuition of how to ascertain what is right and wrong and how to act accordingly.

Romeo and Juliet is a similarly fertile field for exploring how characters come by their knowledge or beliefs. For example, in one exemplary scene the Friar tries to convince Romeo that the young lover's plight is not as hopeless as he imagines. The Friar's sermon-like appeal is almost entirely based on logic; meanwhile, Romeo's insistence on interpreting his exile from Verona as tantamount to death is based purely on his emotions. Similarly, the Friar's decision to marry Romeo and Juliet without the consent of the families or the Prince—a decision motivated by the opportunity to bring peace to the long-feuding families and city streets—is based on his faith and Christian priorities. At the play's conclusion, the Prince dismisses the survivors, expecting that the tragic events will teach them a lesson—a belief or hope based on experience.

Because of their brevity, poems are sometimes more difficult to analyze for epistemology, but hardly impossible. For example, Emily Dickinson's poetry often features speakers who exhibit a reliance on sensory input. In "Apparently with no surprise," the speaker watches as a "blond assassin" (a metaphor for frost) "beheads" a flower, and this natural event informs her later expression about the lack of compassion of God, who is called "approving." In another poem, "Tell all the Truth," the speaker comes to her knowledge about truth itself based on her experience of the natural phenomenon of lightning.

Students gain experience in analyzing "ways of knowing" by practicing on characters in short stories, novels, plays, and poetry. Using the filter of epistemology helps students see the roots of many person vs. person conflicts that arise in fiction, and can be extended into other discussion and writing assignments to help students think more critically and gain self awareness.

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