

Introducing and teaching *Tomorrow, When the War Began*

Year 9

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The challenge I was faced with was to enthuse twenty-four Year 9 students to read and study a novel of over 200 pages as a compulsory class text. The class consisted of heterogeneous, mixed ability students with varying interests in reading and writing. The class included two ESL students, one integration student with a short-term memory problem and several students with learning difficulties. My aim was not only to motivate each student to read the novel because it was a work requirement, but I also wanted them to enjoy it as a piece of riveting and worthy literature. I realised that I had to think carefully about how I would introduce a long novel about war not only to integration students, students with learning difficulties and capable, but reluctant, readers and writers. I also realised that computers and the Internet were mediums that I could utilise in order to rouse interest in reading and expand student's use of learning technologies in my classroom. I also saw this an ideal opportunity to expose students to a new tool, which they could use to access information and increase their literacy.

I decided to introduce the author first and then the novel. I timed this at the end of term prior to our study of the novel. My ultimate aim was to engage and enthuse students enough to allow them to read some of the novel during their holiday break, so that it would save precious time reading it word for word in class.

I sat at my computer and surfed the net for some interesting sites which students could access and learn more about the author, John Marsden and about the *Tomorrow* series. Before long I found a suitable site constructed by Pan/Macmillan which had lots of relevant and interesting information about a range of Australian authors as well as many relevant and interesting hyperlinks. Before the end of the session I had pieced together a sketchy assignment which the students would complete as they accessed the web site. As a precautionary measure I emailed John Marsden (a link on the web site) and asked him if the site was likely to change as I had designed an assignment, which was specific to that particular web site. He responded the following day and was inspired by my approach to his novel.

I began by asking the students what they knew about the author. Their responses were varied but many didn't know much other than the fact that he was the author of their compulsory novel study. A couple of students had already read some of his novels, including some of the *Tomorrow* series. Being aware of the vast range of students' ability in the class I 'gauged' their use of the Internet and then set about preparing a handout for the students that needed directed guidance. We made a collective list of some of the common terms associated with the Internet and web sites and I was pleased to discover that most students had some knowledge of the World Wide Web. About one third of the class had used the Internet at home or in other classes.

Before long they were scheduled in the Internet laboratory for two 48-minute sessions and they set off to investigate John Marsden (and the *Tomorrow* series) with the ultimate task of preparing a character profile on the author. They were encouraged to be creative about how they presented his profile. This included oral and written mediums (eg. a 'Power Point' presentation, journal poster or report).

During the first session students took more time than expected to successfully link to the designated site (Murphy's Law always results in technical problems). I had to improvise and allow an extra session for research. I asked students to work in pairs, preferably a student with some experience with Internet with a student that needed guidance. This worked quite well, but as a result of not all computers being able to link to the site some groups increased to three or four students. Nevertheless, all students were engaged and working on the task by diligently taking notes to compile their profile. The end result was valuable collaborative learning activity.

Throughout the sessions I circulated from group to group and guided them through their varied problems. Their faces clearly showed their delight when they discovered another aspect about the Internet or about John Marsden. They were genuinely interested in the information but I'm sure that the medium had a lot to do with it too.

During the three sessions students developed a range of literacy skills such as note-taking skills, skim reading, selecting relevant information for a specific purpose, how to follow www hyperlinks and extend their knowledge of John Marsden and the *Tomorrow* series. Some students even took risks and delved into links on other Australian authors like Paul Jennings and Morris Gleitzman. This created an interest in Australian authors and their works.

The students were given two extra sessions in the classroom to prepare their final Character Profile. Most students opted to present it in a written format, however, the end product was not important. I had successfully motivated most students' interest in a famous Australian author and increased their genuine desire to read *Tomorrow*, *When the War Began* for enjoyment rather than because they had to.

During the last week of term we proceeded to read the novel together in class. They were keenly engaged and attentive during our four sessions of reading aloud. All students were encouraged to read and many wanted second turns at reading to the class. Even the integration student participated to the best of his ability.

One of my concerns was that the integration and learning difficulty students would have trouble retaining the detailed and lengthy plot for the duration of our collective reading of the novel. Therefore, I arranged for them to listen to a commercial audio reading of the novel, with the supervision and assistance of the Integration Aide. This kept these students interested and they were encouraged to take the tapes home so they could finish the tapes at about the same time as the class. This was very successful and allowed them to participate in most of the follow-up activities and tasks.

At the end of the last lesson of the term students were told that they should read the next four chapters (about forty pages) over the holiday break. A couple of students complained that they couldn't read that much but I encouraged them by telling them to read as much as they could.

After the holiday break I was amazed to discover that six students had not only read the set four chapters, but they had also finished reading the whole novel and had borrowed the sequel from their local library. I certainly did not expect such a positive response. One student even admitted that he had never liked reading but that he 'couldn't put the book down' and was angry that the local and school libraries did not have a copy of the sequel available for borrowing. I solved his problem by lending him my copy, which is now being passed around the class.

After reading the entire novel in class and at home the students completed a range of tasks ranging from comprehension questions, summaries, reading logs, journal entries, an email to

John Marsden, study of metaphors, a novel review, an oral presentation and a creative written task. Their major written response included options such as writing the next chapter to the novel, a character's diary entries, poetry about themes covered in the novel or a feature article about a major incident in the novel. The students completed all tasks to the best of their ability but with genuine interest and engagement. Since I was on a roll with learning technologies they had to complete the oral presentation using *Power Point* and their major written task had to be presented using *MS Word* or *MS Publisher*. The final products demonstrated a high level of interest in the task and an excellent grasp of the major aspects of the novel.

This experience has taught me that if you give enough thought and planning to a major study of a challenging text you will achieve the desired response, motivation and engagement from most students. I also realised that it is worth persisting in trying to engage and enthuse reluctant, but capable, readers about worthy literature texts. The time spent preparing some of the activities was well worth it. I will use this approach to study texts at all levels, from Year 7 to VCE.