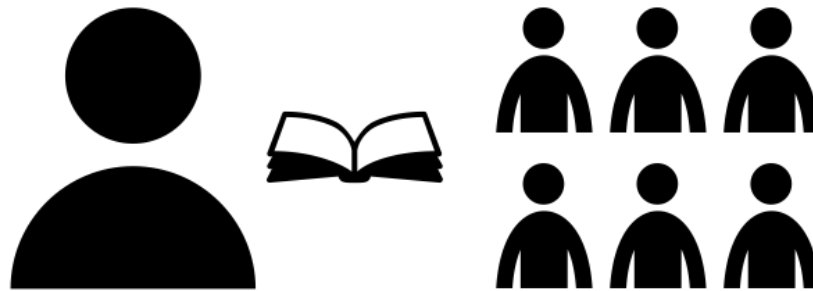# IHS Project-Based Learning, Research & Connections

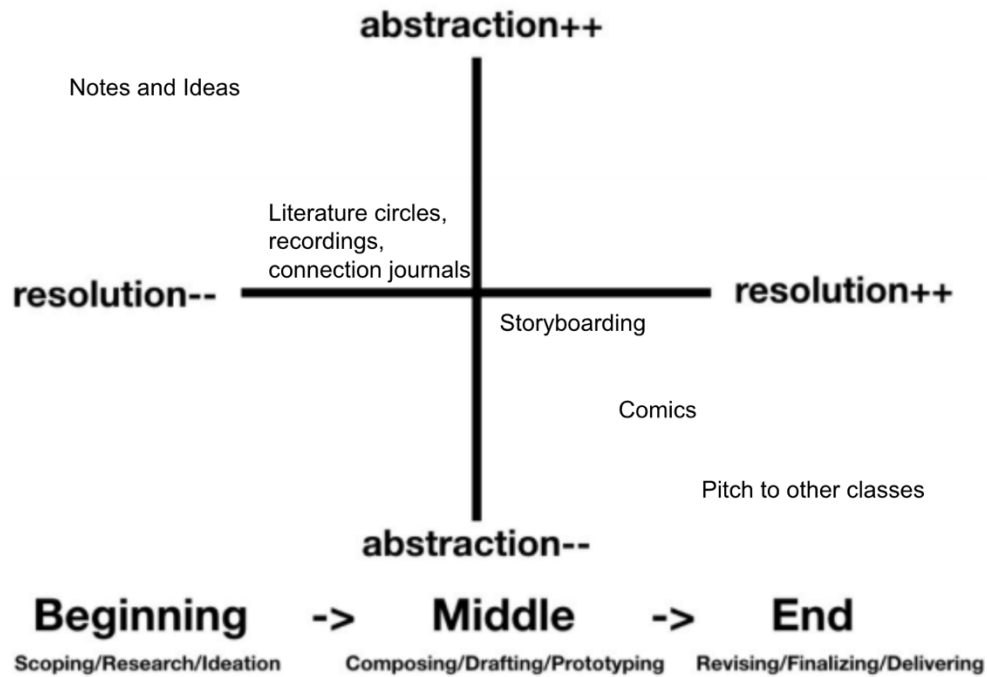*Report by Megan Chang, Emily Chen, Aditya Jha, Benjamin Yeo*

Design Challenge Introduction & Partner Goals

Our partner Sarah plans to implement project-based learning in her English class by having her students choose their own book to understand literature and cultures outside the United States. Sarah not only wants to teach her students how to draw connections between two pieces of literature, but she also wants her students to be able to empathize with the characters in a book regardless of the differences in experiences between the student and the characters. To fulfill Sarah's goals, students will create a comic that connects a book they read to other books and to their own personal experiences. Students will then present their comics to students in another English class.

Later, students will work on a multi-genre research paper where the students are free to choose from a variety of genres to present their research. Sarah wants them to focus on a type of writing; this includes but is not limited to a play, article, chart, comic strip, song, poem, presentation, or drawing. However, given the open-ended nature of this large assignment, Sarah has to make sure that she is guiding students in the right direction by providing with them the resources they need to succeed. This direction gives students full control of their ideas and goals as she approves any topic. Sarah already has plans for giving students good resources, such as teaching them about Pixton and introducing them to a Padlet that lists and explains numerous different genre mediums.

abstraction++

Notes and Ideas

Literature circles,
recordings,
connection journals

resolution-- ——————————————— resolution++

Storyboarding

Comics

Pitch to other classes

abstraction--

Beginning -> **Middle** -> **End**

Scoping/Research/Ideation   Composing/Drafting/Prototyping   Revising/Finalizing/Delivering

Thus, we interpret the book talk design challenge as making connections primarily to personal experiences, and eventually pitching books to their peers. We perceive that the future design challenge will be guiding Sarah's students so that they can effectively choose and translate their idea into an engaging multi-genre research paper. To address this design challenge, we suggest using the media cascade. First, students begin with some ideas and choose an idea that appeals to them the most. Then, they research and gather resources that support their idea, increasing the resolution and decreasing the abstraction of their project. Next, the students will use the resources they have gathered to draft their project; students can draft their projects by creating scripts, storyboarding, or prototyping. This step may require multiple iterations; however, the goal is for the students to make their drafts less abstract and of higher resolution. After the students are satisfied with their draft, they can more easily construct their final product.

Preparatory Activities
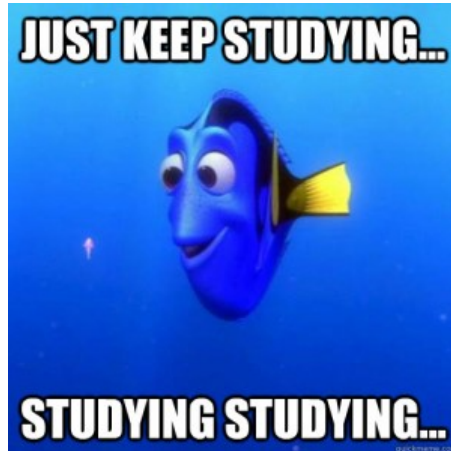
To prepare for an engaging and nontraditional research paper, Sarah acknowledged students' feelings and made a platform with various media forms available to them. In addition, she opened herself to new possibilities by saying "yes" and was thus introduced to the world of gifs and memes.
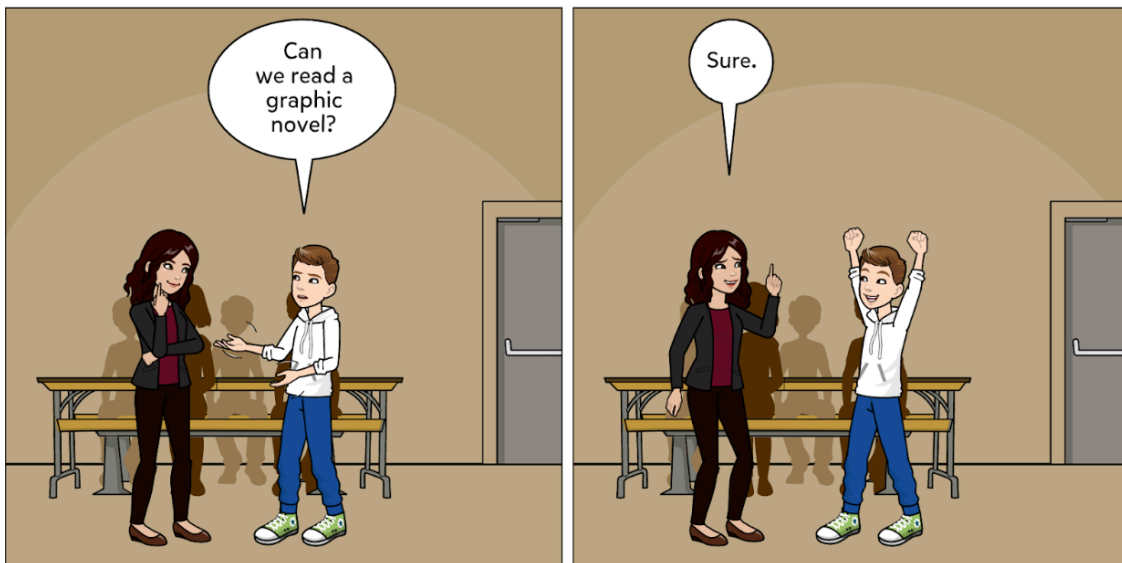
To acclimate students, she incorporated a project into the current unit: literature circles. Working towards the goal of sharing their personal connections in a book talk, students ranked the books they were interested in. From there, the groups had recorded self-led discussions, which promoted drawing connections and communicating with peers throughout the reading stage. This exposes students to another form of media and allows them to reflect on their responses. Additionally, by using an online document for notes, the students can answer each other's questions and add on to existing ideas.

Since the audience will consist of other ninth graders, they have a good understanding of what details may create excitement about their book. The connections of interest are especially important because they provide a sense of familiarity even though the unit theme is cultures outside the United States. The students also have a journal-writing assignment to practice explaining their connections to the book rather than offering a summary. They must then transition to articulating their connections to the book to their peers.
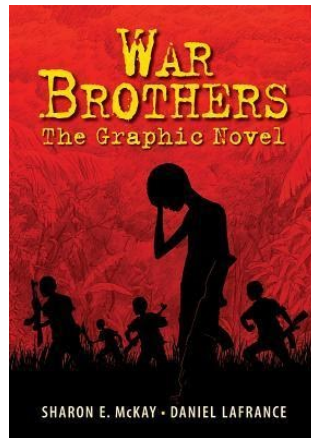

One group felt their book was "too different" and consequently too hard to relate to. By looking at broader ideas, they were able to insert themselves into the book through broad connections. Having finished their books, students debriefed on their feelings and were introduced to Pixton. Given the opportunity to explore, the students enjoyed changing the facial expressions, hairstyles, and positions of characters. Even in an unfinished state, the comics showed creativity and an inclination towards casual language. While an unintended effect, this could appeal to their audience. The move away from conventional schoolwork showed how media is not always a distraction but can instead generate curiosity and an eagerness to learn.

Fieldwork
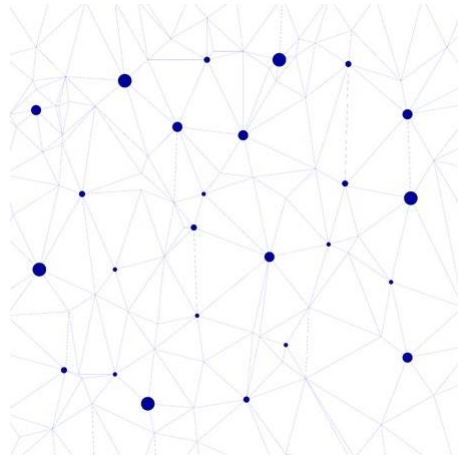
Diving deeper into the specific fieldwork that we did, our team supported various student groups working with different novels and tried to guide their thinking when finding connections. Our team approached this by asking students to describe major themes, central ideas and conflicts in the stories they were reading and then consider the other contexts they have encountered before that share these central ideas and/or conflicts.
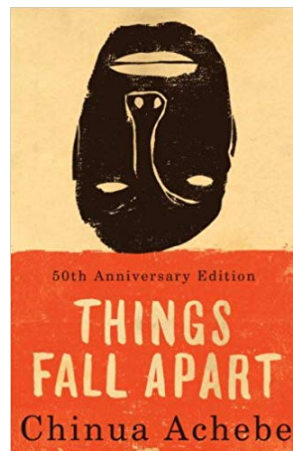
Through this exercise, we found that students had a great grasp on the content of the books they were reading and were skilled in drawing connections to prior novels they had read in the class, particularly *Things Fall Apart*. But, we also found that students had a lot of difficulty relating the central themes they saw in the novels to their own lives.

For example, in one group, students were reading about a girl in her early-teens in Nigeria who had been forced into sexual slavery after her village had been overtaken by a military uprising. In the novel, this girl is forced to move into another home away from all her friends and family, change her religion to Islam and be a child wife to a much older man who abuses her. Furthermore, she is not allowed to attend school or learn any new skills.

Students in the class didn't believe that any of these points in the novel connected to their lives as they all had the opportunity to attend school and could freely express their religion. They thus felt that they could not link their own experiences with the tremendously difficult trials that the stories' protagonist had to endure.

However, as our conversation progressed, the students soon realized that their lives did share some similarities to the novel they were reading. For instance, a student in this group had moved from South Africa to the United States five years ago and connected with the themes of displacement and the experience of moving to a new place without familiar figures. In this way, we uncovered how to relate between personal experiences and fictional ones based on shared feelings and ideas.

Future Plans & Further Work

Moving forward, our future plans take a myriad of forms, mainly due to the different stages of the class's literature circles in terms of their progress with their transmedia projects. Firstly, for circles that are still in the brainstorming phase of their comics, the team members have agreed to better equip themselves with ideas for translating book themes into deeper concepts for the students. As aforementioned, many students struggled with drawing inspiration from the book for their comics. Furthermore, as Sarah aptly mandated, a direct narration or summary of a scene would be elementary and unmeaningful for the students. As the students progress further down the cascade, they will discuss the given readings and continue to work on making their comics. Students will be able to engage in a meaningful and positive transmedia experience using the media cascade and Pixton. Moving forward, we have discussed that we will help them generate some ideas. We decided on the following starting questions:

- If you have trouble drawing a direct connection between the book and your life, why is this so? What foreign feelings or problems did the characters face? What did the book teach you about these issues?
- Imagine you are a character. How would it feel to interact with the characters? Could this be part of your comic idea?
- How can these reactions be used to interest your peers in your pitch?

For the multi-genre research project, we can prepare by looking at previous projects posted on the website Sarah showed us. In addition, we can research topics that are popular with 9th grade students, such as sports, animals, and video games. Understanding students through current social media trends and memes could also be helpful. Once students pick a subject, we will encourage them to find reputable sources as one would for a traditional paper. However, we will also help them find the best platform for their ideas while keeping their audience in mind.