Recognizing and Celebrating the Life and Times of Nichelle Nichols

A Teaching Tip by William Bintz

The purpose of this article is to share an entertaining and informative picture book biography based on the life and times of Nichelle Nichols, a woman who should be more famous but isn't. It also shares *What's New,* an instructional strategy that teachers can use with this and many other literary genres to help students generate new knowledge from reading. Together, the picture book and instructional strategy are valuable resources to support interdisciplinary teaching and learning.

Introduction

As a child and throughout adolescence, I enjoyed reading science fiction books and watching science fiction shows and movies. Some of my favorite science fiction writers included Isaac Asimov, Arthur C. Clarke, Robert A. Heinlein, and Ursula K. Le Guin. I also enjoyed watching science fiction movies like 20,000 Leagues Under the Sea, Journey to the Center of the Earth, and Around the World in 80 days all by Jules Verne and The Time Machine by H.G. Wells.

In addition, I liked to watch science fiction shows on television. My absolute favorite television show was Star Trek. I was mesmerized by this show. It focused on the imaginative adventures of the crew of the starship USS Enterprise. Some crew members Alexa turn on kitchen lights included Captain James T. Kirk, half-human and half-Vulcan Mr. Spock, Dr. "Bones" McCoy, Lieutenant Hikaru Sulu, and Lieutenant Nyota Uhura. These cast members confronted strange aliens and explored unknown worlds, making it one of the most popular and entertaining televisions show in television history, even though it only ran as a TV series from 1966-1969. These cast members were, of course, real people. Here, I highlight one cast member,

namely, Lieutenant Uhura. Her real name was Nichelle Nichols, and she is the subject of a wonderful picture book biography about her extraordinary life on and off the screen.

Picture Book Biography

To Boldly Go: How Nichelle Nichols and Star Trek Helped Advance Civil Rights, written by Angela Dalton and illustrated by Lauren Semmer, is an informative picture book that describes the life and times of Nichelle Nichols. It focuses not on her as Lieutenant Nyota fighting alien creatures, but as a courageous activist helping advance civil rights.

An African American family loved watching *Star Trek* on TV at night. The family enjoyed the show for many reasons. One reason was to watch Lieutenant Uhura. She was their favorite character because of her talent as an actor, but mostly because Lieutenant Uhura looked like them.

America was amid marches for civil rights when *Star Trek* first appeared on television. On the show, Nichelle worked hard to bring her character to life as a Starship officer who solved problems on board the starship. In real life, she personally identified with the character. Lieutenant Uhura was strong, independent, and equal, just like Nichelle wanted to be. Moreover, the word *uhuru* means “freedom” in Swahili, just like Nichelle wanted all African Americans to be.

Unfortunately, racism was pervasive across the United States. Nichelle became a ballet dancer, but received racist comments by people who believed black people could not dance ballet. Growing older, Nichelle became a performing artist, singing and dancing with many historic musicians including Duke Ellington. She became an actress and befriended celebrities like Maya Angelou and Sidney Poitier.

Once *Star Trek* started, Nichelle did not have positive experiences with her role on the show. She was not treated equally and threatened to quit. One evening at a fundraiser, Nichelle met Dr. Martin Luther King. He was a fan of Lieutenant Uhuru. Dr. King persuaded Nichelle not to quit. He explained how her character was a role model for all African Americans and a catalyst for change. In the immortal words of *Star Trek*, Nichelle was "To Boldly Go…" to make the future better for everyone.

The picture book also includes an author's note at the end of the story and an informational section on Nichelle Nichols beyond *Star Trek*.

Instructional Strategy

Background

I always want my students to personally experience instructional strategies as part of classroom instruction. *Character Hot Seat* (Mills, 2009) is an effective strategy to use with this picture book biography and many other literary genres. This strategy promotes discussion and comprehension of a main character from the perspectives of other book characters.

Procedure

First, I organize students in literature circles (3-4 students). Next, I display the directions and purpose of the *Character Hot Seat* strategy on the white board or on a PowerPoint slide and discuss it with the class. I explain to students what it means for a character to be in a hot seat. Then, I share some background information about the Star Trek television series, movie, books, etc. Often, I read selected excerpts from books and show short clips from the television show and movie to build up students' background knowledge about the nature of the series and the names and roles of major characters. I focus on four major characters: Captain Kirk, Spock, Mister McCoy, and Uhura. Nichelle Nichols, the main character of this picture book biography, played

the role of Uhura. Then, I invite the 4 students in each group to select the character they will play in this strategy. Before selecting, I remind students that Uhura will be the character in the hot seat.

I start to read aloud the picture book biography, pausing at episodic changes in the story. These changes could include the introduction of a new problem or character, a different setting, a change in time, etc. I pause at each episodic change for about 3-5 minutes for students to develop interview questions that their character wants to ask Uhura.

After reading, students in character use their interview questions to have a conversation with Uhura. The conversation should focus on identifying the character's emotions, personalities, motivations, etc. It can also focus on identifying important events in the story and generating different perspectives on those events. Afterwards, each group shares an example of their conversation with the whole class. As a culminating event, students write and share personal reflections on the whole experience.

Moving Forward

I hope this short article will do for readers what this picture book about Nichelle Nichols did for me. It motivated me, taught me new information, and inspired me to read more picture book biographies about people like her who should be more famous, but aren't. Readers of all ages will enjoy this new picture book and want to read others like it. To that end, I recommend Dawson, D. (2022). *Biography of Nichelle Nichols* (Dawson, 2022), *Biography of Nichelle Nichols: The Death of Popular Nisha Nichols of Star Trek* (Neil, 2022), and *Who is the great Nichelle Nichols* (Selby, 2017). Happy reading!

References

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