



2024

Joyful Learning: Station Rotation Activities in a High School English Class

Annie Yon
Fair Lawn High School

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.montclair.edu/nj-english-journal>



Part of the [Educational Methods Commons](#), [Language and Literacy Education Commons](#), [Secondary Education Commons](#), and the [Secondary Education and Teaching Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Yon, Annie (2024) "Joyful Learning: Station Rotation Activities in a High School English Class," *New Jersey English Journal*: Vol. 13, Article 16.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.montclair.edu/nj-english-journal/vol13/iss2024/16>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Montclair State University Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in New Jersey English Journal by an authorized editor of Montclair State University Digital Commons. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@montclair.edu.

Joyful Learning: Station Rotation Activities in a High School English Class

ANNIE YON
Fair Lawn High School

“The next novel we will be reading is F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*. Everybody, stand up from your seats and move toward the center of the room. On the SmartBoard, you will see a slide with a statement. If you agree with the statement, you will move to the left side; if you disagree, head over to the right side of the room. Are you ready?”

My juniors nodded eagerly as the screen emitted the statement: “In our society, a college degree from a ‘prestigious’ university makes you have a higher social status.” Seventeen students shuffled over to the left and eight students moved to the right.

I asked, “Who wants to start first?”

Multiple hands sprung up, and Robert* claimed, “I think a college degree is important because it can help with social mobility and increased job opportunities, but I don’t think going to a ‘prestigious’ university makes you *more* socially accepted. You can go to a lesser-known college with a full scholarship instead of having debt at a ‘top’ college. I would respect the financially responsible person more.”

Alicia countered, “*But* if I introduce a random person and say she’s a student at Harvard University, you’d be more impressed than if I said she was from some small college in Minnesota. This shows that prestige is important.” Students added to the conversation buttressing both Alicia’s and Robert’s arguments; some of their classmates even switched sides chuckling, “I

disagreed with the statement initially, but Alicia made a good point.”

For the entire 45-minute period, students shuffled back and forth across the room arguing their opinions for each thematic statement. When I announced that class was over, a few students incredulously looked at the clock and voiced, “Wow, already? This period flew by!”

The Issue: Lack of Joy in the Classroom

Alfie Kohn, an American author and lecturer in the areas of education and human behavior, asserts in his essay “Feel-Bad Education” that “joy has been in short supply in some classrooms because students tend to be regarded not as subjects but as objects, not as learners but as workers.” He explains that students are forced to sit through prefabricated lessons in a sterile classroom, whose purpose is not to promote thinking, much less the joy of discovery, but to raise test scores. In other words, richer thinking cannot come from monotonous multiple-choice exams or never-ending worksheets but from “an atmosphere of exuberant discovery” (Kohn). Similarly, Dr. Judy Willis, a board-certified neurologist and classroom teacher, discusses the benefits of joy in the classroom in her essay “The Neuroscience of Joyful Education”:

Lessons that are more stimulating and challenging are more likely to pass through the reticular activating system. When classroom activities are pleasurable, the brain releases dopamine, a neurotransmitter that stimulates the memory centers and promotes the

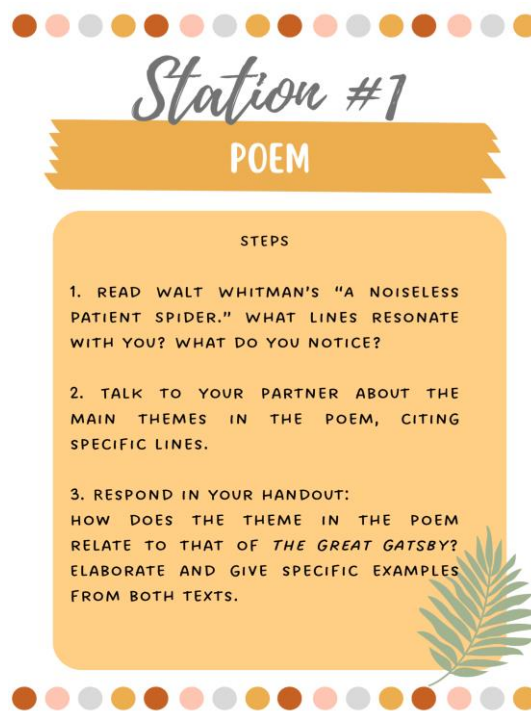
*Names have been changed.

release of acetylcholine, which increases focused attention.

Ultimately, Dr. Willis contends that when creating lessons, educators should consider novelty, stress-free classrooms, and pleasurable associations linked with learning as these factors lead to more dopamine, focused attention, and enhanced information retention.

Rotation Stations for *The Great Gatsby*

After three weeks, my students had finished reading *The Great Gatsby*, and I had planned a rotation station lesson. Rather than listening to the teacher lecture for 45 minutes in rows and columns, I wanted my juniors to move around, collaborate, and learn from their peers as they did with the thematic debate at the start of the unit. Mina Gavell, a seasoned teacher, discusses how task-based reading activities, such as rotation stations, create “a student-centered class with many opportunities for communication because as students are working in pairs, they offer support to one another and negotiate answers.” In addition, station activities “provide the extrinsic push—after all, it is a class assignment—but also sets up an environment for intrinsic motivation in the form of a fun and interactive activity [...] thereby setting themselves up for greater success and a sense of accomplishment” (Gavell 3). In creating this lesson, my objective was for students to be stimulated and engaged throughout the entire lesson while gaining new insights about *The Great Gatsby*. I assembled five stations of diverse activities and set the timer for eight minutes each. Students were strategically put into pairs with one handout for their responses; two-three pairs were then dispersed to different stations and rotated clockwise.



Station #1

POEM


STEPS

1. READ WALT WHITMAN'S "A NOISELESS PATIENT SPIDER." WHAT LINES RESONATE WITH YOU? WHAT DO YOU NOTICE?
2. TALK TO YOUR PARTNER ABOUT THE MAIN THEMES IN THE POEM, CITING SPECIFIC LINES.
3. RESPOND IN YOUR HANDOUT: HOW DOES THE THEME IN THE POEM RELATE TO THAT OF *THE GREAT GATSBY*? ELABORATE AND GIVE SPECIFIC EXAMPLES FROM BOTH TEXTS.

Station 1: Walt Whitman's "A Noiseless Patient Spider"

In station 1, students read Walt Whitman's "A Noiseless Patient Spider." Their task was to determine the poem's meaning then eventually make text-to-text connections. When students were stuck, I scaffolded by asking the following questions: *What might the speaker mean in the last few lines when he mentions 'seeking the spheres to connect them'? What might be the 'gossamer thread' that Gatsby 'tirelessly tries to fling'? How is Gatsby also 'isolated' and 'detached' from the group he wants to be part of?*

Most students started talking right away, mentioning topics of loneliness and the importance of meaningful relationships. For example, Silvia and Jessica discussed, "I think the theme could be about isolation. The spider is alone and 'surrounded, detached, in measureless oceans of space.' It reminds me of Gatsby because regardless of how many people showed up to his parties to relish in his wealth, in the end, no one





Station #2

ART: "THE PERSISTENCE OF MEMORY"
(SALVADOR DALI, 1931)

STEPS

1. LOOK AT THIS PAINTING BY DALI "THE PERSISTENCE OF MEMORY."
2. RESPOND IN YOUR HANDOUT:
 - WHAT DO YOU NOTICE ABOUT THE PAINTING? WHAT COLORS AND OBJECTS DO YOU SEE?
 - WHAT MESSAGE DO YOU THINK IS BEING CONVEYED THROUGH THE PAINTING? SEE TITLE TOO.
 - WHAT CONNECTIONS CAN YOU MAKE TO GATSBY?

showed up when it truly mattered—at his funeral—despite how many calls were made. They're both alone and neglected." Another pair, Casey and Miriam, added to the conversation, "The spider is trying to build its web 'launch[ing] forth filament, filament, filament, out of itself, ever unreeling them, ever tirelessly speeding them' and seeks connection. This is similar to Gatsby's discipline and drive in trying to attain his goal of being with Daisy in her world of East Egg." As students wrapped up this station and jotted down their final interpretations, they gave each other high-fives saying, "Good job!"

Station 2: Salvador Dali's "The Persistence of Memory"

In station 2, students looked at Salvador Dali's "The Persistence of Memory" and used visual thinking strategies to analyze the painting. Students made observations about the painting by responding to these questions: *What's going on in this picture? What do you notice that makes you say that? What more can you find?*

Jacob started, "The landscape is barren. There's a cliff, a tree with only branches, and a lot of clocks. The clocks are melting or warped. I know Dali is known for surrealism. What is that fleshy thing? Is that an eyelash?"

Mary proposed, "Maybe the repeated image of clocks symbolizes something about time? Oh! The title is 'The Persistence of Memory.' So could the painting be about time and memory?"

Jacob replied, "Ants...melting clocks...surrealism...memory. Maybe it conveys the idea that memories persist but can change over time; memories become distorted or warped."

Esther shared, "I think the drooping clocks symbolize that time isn't real here or that it fades. Wait, all the clocks show the same time; time is frozen."

Mary had an epiphany: "In *The Great Gatsby*, time is relative. Gatsby is stuck in the past and to him, it doesn't matter that five years have passed. He remembers every tiny detail of Daisy. Even though Gatsby is persistent in thinking that Daisy is still the same girl he fell for, she's married to Tom now. The painting shows a vast empty land; it's kind of like the emptiness of Gatsby's life. Gatsby only focused on Daisy, but she betrayed him and didn't even attend his funeral." As opposed to a solitary reader response paragraph, peer learning and exposure to diverse perspectives through a small group discussion led to higher engagement, improved communication skills, and an enhanced understanding of both the painting and story.

Station 3: Fitzgerald's Biography

In station 3, students briefly read over Fitzgerald's biography and were asked to make connections between the author's life and Gatsby's. As one partner read the printed article, the other continued to jot down facts about the author's life.



Station #3

FITZGERALD'S LIFE

STEPS

1. READ ABOUT THE LIVES OF F. SCOTT FITZGERALD AND ZELDA FITZGERALD.
2. WHAT DO FITZGERALD AND JAY GATSBY HAVE IN COMMON?
3. DOES THIS INFORMATION MAKE YOU THINK ABOUT THE BOOK OR THE CHARACTERS DIFFERENTLY?



“It seems that both the author and Jay Gatsby believed that if they became wealthy, they could get ‘the girl’ and live happily ever after. Zelda broke off their engagement because of Scott Fitzgerald’s paltry salary and only married him after he published *This Side of Paradise*. Likewise, Gatsby was only able to gain Daisy’s attention by pretending to be on the same stratum as her. He gave her a false sense of security until he became rich,” David said.

“Both Gatsby and Fitzgerald enlisted in the army. The story takes place in the Roaring Twenties, and Fitzgerald includes his own life experiences from 1920s. They both have downfalls too; the author falls victim to alcoholism then dies of a heart attack, and Gatsby is shot by Wilson and becomes the scapegoat for all the crimes,” Kayla noted.

David replied, “Wow. Fitzgerald literally is Gatsby. His wealth didn’t provide him with happiness, and he struggled with issues in his life.” This station activity was much more impactful than a teacher lecturing and

students memorizing facts; discovery learning allowed them to take on a more active role in making meaning and text-to-text connections.

Station 4: The Significance of the Title

In station 4, students read a quote taken from *The Great Gatsby* and discussed the following questions: *Why do you think the title is called The Great Gatsby? In your opinion, is Gatsby “great”? Does this “greatness” provide him with what he wants?* Similar to the pre-reading activity where students had to agree or disagree with thematic statements, in this activity, students enjoyed debating their perspectives on why they thought the title was misleading or accurate.

For example, Anna and Nathan argued, “The title is deceiving, and we don’t think Gatsby is great. He had no meaningful relationships as seen with the lack of attendance at his funeral. He was just a man who threw parties for an unachieved goal.”



Station #4

THE TITLE

STEPS

WITH YOUR GROUP, DISCUSS THE QUESTIONS AND JOT NOTES:

- IS GATSBY “GREAT”?
- GIVE TEXTUAL EXAMPLES.
- ANALYZE THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE TITLE.



Gloria counterargued, “Gatsby is ‘great’ because even though he couldn’t be with Daisy, his rags-to-riches story and

‘extraordinary gift for hope’ are quite rare and admirable. He stayed dedicated to the ‘promises of life’ and his dream like an ‘intricate machine.’ He never strayed from his goal, which makes him ‘great.’”

Nathan jumped back in: “Rags-to-riches, yes, but he lived a corrupt lifestyle and made his money illegally working with Wolfsheim! How can you say he’s ‘great’?”

Taylor supported Gloria: “He turned his entire life around, starting as a poor clam digger and salmon fisher to becoming this illustrious and wealthy man. It shows the depths of his perseverance and optimism.”

This station buzzed with their zealous opinions on their perspectives of whether Gatsby deserved to be called “great.” In this station, students listened to diverse opinions, which led to cognitive dissonance. Cognitive dissonance “facilitates the cognitive processes of accommodation and assimilation, which are central to knowledge development; learners are presented with new knowledge and must expend mental effort to integrate this information into their existing schema” (Adcock). Students were

encouraged to think more deeply, and the process strengthened their critical thinking skills and metacognitive abilities.

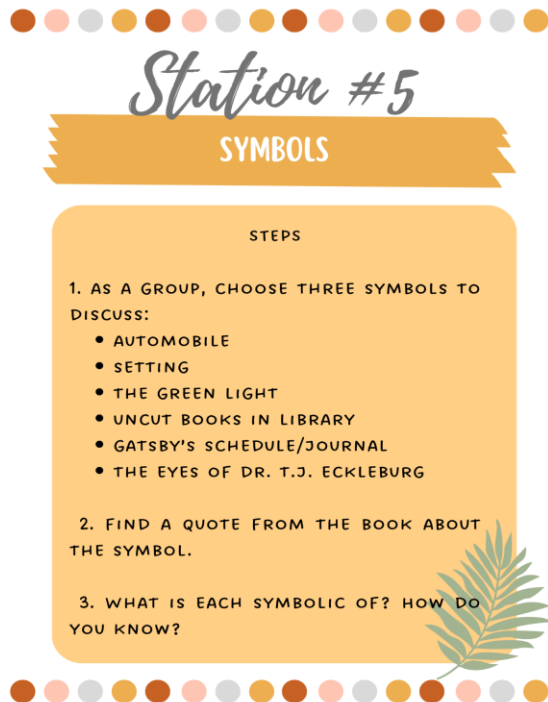
Station 5: Symbolism

Copies of *The Great Gatsby* were scattered on the desks along with six images of symbols to analyze. Tiffany and Evan wrote about automobiles in the story:

“Automobiles represent the carelessness of the people in the Roaring Twenties. For instance, Owl Eyes was involved in a car accident after Gatsby’s party. Tom Buchanan was caught with a chambermaid after a car accident. Daisy killed Myrtle while driving. People were drinking and driving. Cars are a symbol for destruction and the drivers’ reckless behaviors.”

Teresa and Anastasia discussed the green light at the end of Daisy’s dock: “Oh, this is a good quote. ‘Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us.’ He was optimistic about his American dream to the very end—the one with Daisy and the old money world she lives in—but it was beyond his grasp.”

Sarah and Alicia explained the symbolism of the uncut book in Gatsby’s library: “This is a good quote about the uncut books: ‘It’s a bona-fide piece of printed matter. This fella’s a regular Belasco. What thoroughness! What realism! Knew when to stop too—didn’t cut the pages!’ Owl Eyes also says that if one book is removed from the shelf, the whole library would collapse. Everything Gatsby does or says is a facade; he wants to depict himself as someone intelligent and well-read, but he hasn’t ever read these books. They’re all for show; he’s a fraud.” Students continued to revisit the novel, work together to find quotes, analyze, and discuss the significance of the symbols they chose. In this station, symbolism was an accessible vantage point for students to analyze.



Station #5

SYMBOLS

STEPS

1. AS A GROUP, CHOOSE THREE SYMBOLS TO DISCUSS:
 - AUTOMOBILE
 - SETTING
 - THE GREEN LIGHT
 - UNCUT BOOKS IN LIBRARY
 - GATSBY'S SCHEDULE/JOURNAL
 - THE EYES OF DR. T.J. ECKLEBURG
2. FIND A QUOTE FROM THE BOOK ABOUT THE SYMBOL.
3. WHAT IS EACH SYMBOLIC OF? HOW DO YOU KNOW?

Student Reflections: “That was fun!”

When the period was over, Helen repeated to her group and me, “This was so fun! Every station was creative and interactive. I liked how we got to talk to our partners and hear all the different thoughts people had about the same topic. Can we do this again with our next book?” I asked students to write a reflection to assess their engagement with the station activities and see what their takeaways were. They responded to the following questions: *What was your favorite and least favorite station? Discuss your experience collaborating with your partner and group. What new information did you learn from this activity that might’ve enhanced your understanding of The Great Gatsby?*

Robert wrote, “This activity was fun because it wasn’t all work, and I got to share my ideas with everyone. My favorite station was the painting one because it was creative, and we all had different ideas about its meaning. If I had to answer the questions alone, then I wouldn’t have learned or seen multiple insights that people had about the artwork.” Alicia agreed: “It was interesting to pinpoint the little details in the painting, find meaning, and make connections among the painting, book, and our lives. We talked about the volatility of time and memories.” In addition to the “The Persistence of Memory” station, many students enjoyed station 4, in which they discussed whether Gatsby is “great.” Rishi shared, “This station was enjoyable because while we had various opinions, we concluded that Gatsby is inspirational because of his optimism and determination in chasing after his dream.” Jose added, “I liked that station too because everyone in my group had a different idea of what ‘greatness’ means, and I got to see how many people besides myself admired Gatsby just as I did.” Furthermore, I also learned that students enjoyed station 3. Esther explained, “Station 3 was my favorite

because we looked into Fitzgerald and Zelda’s lives, and I saw how much of Fitzgerald’s life was like Gatsby’s.” Javit added, “Station 3 enhanced my understanding of *The Great Gatsby* because it showed me that while Fitzgerald and Gatsby obtained their goals of becoming wealthy, money didn’t buy complete happiness.” Olivia concluded, “Even though I dislike biographies, I liked reading about Fitzgerald and how the author included personal moments from his life into his writing. It made the story more meaningful.”

What I found amusing was how diverse the answers were when it came to students’ most and least favorite stations. For instance, while some students raved about how much they enjoyed the art station since “meaning doesn’t come only from text but also visuals,” others voiced that this was their least favorite “because it was difficult to interpret what the image meant and there wasn’t a clear and objective answer.” Furthermore, while some students shared that they liked the symbols station because “symbols reveal a lot about the book’s themes, and it was rewarding identifying the symbols, such as the repeated car accidents,” others expressed, “it was difficult to find a quote and analyze the symbols’ meanings.” In addition, some students mentioned, “It’s difficult to say what [their] favorite station was, because each allowed [them] to see the bigger picture of the book and served a purpose.”

My Takeaways: What Does Joyful Learning Look Like?

My takeaway from the whole class discussion and student reflections was that my juniors found pleasure in collaborating with a partner and other pairs in the station because “diverse ideas were being exchanged, which allowed them to look at the topic and the story in a novel way.” Students voiced that they were engaged the

entire time because they were “bouncing off each other’s ideas” and the conversation felt “safe and comfortable” even though their opinions differed. They concluded that the station rotation activities were interactive and fun just like the pre-reading debate we started the *The Great Gatsby* unit with because instead of just sitting in columns and rows and completing worksheets, they got to move around the room and participate in tasks together. Learning stations helped to foster student engagement and made my students into active rather than passive learners. In fact, hands-on exercises and activities promoted social involvement among students, leading to cognitive, emotional, and physical engagement (Purinton and Burke 134). Because of this increased engagement and diverse task-based activities, students felt a sense of satisfaction and pleasure, especially when they discovered and constructed the text’s meaning as a team. While rotation stations take meticulous planning and preparation, they are beneficial, even in a high school setting, in creating joyful student-based discussions and preventing redundant and mundane instruction and assessments. Ultimately, by reducing the number of solitary assessments—like multiple-choice and open-ended quizzes to test the students’ knowledge of a book—and replacing them with stimulating and engaging lessons—such as rotation stations that focus on student-led learning, collaboration, diverse task-based activities, and movement—teachers can instill joyful teaching and cease

those moments of students begrudgingly counting down the minutes until class is over.

Works Cited

- Adcock, Amy. “Cognitive Dissonance in the Learning Processes.” *Encyclopedia of the Sciences of Learning*. Springer, 2012. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4419-1428-6_5
- Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. Scribner, 2004.
- Gavell, Mina. “Task-Based Reading Activities Using Authentic Materials and Skills.” *English Teaching Forum*, 2021, pp. 2-9. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1309867>
- Kohn, Alfie. “Feel-Bad Education (Opinion).” *Education Week*, 23 Feb. 2019. <https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/opinion-feel-bad-education/2004/10>
- Purinton, Elizabeth F., and Megan M. Burke. “Student Engagement and Fun: Evidence from the Field.” *Business Education Innovation Journal*, vol. 11, no. 2, 2019, pp. 133-140. <https://hdl.handle.net/11274/14567>
- Whitman, Walt. *A Noiseless Patient Spider*. Poetry Foundation, Oct. 1868. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45473/a-noiseless-patient-spider>
- Willis, Judy. “The Neuroscience of Joyful Education.” *Educational Leadership*, vol., 64, no. 9, pp. 1-5.

ANNIE YON is an English teacher at Fair Lawn High School. Entering her twelfth year, she teaches AP Seminar, English 11 Honors, and Senior Topics: Madness in Literature. She majored in English Education and minored in Creative Writing in Montclair State University and received her Masters in Teaching of English at Columbia University. She is also a Teacher Consultant for the Drew Writing Project, a site of the National Writing Project. She is passionate about pedagogy, research and writing.