

Peace Corps

Paul D. Coverdell World Wise Schools

Educators | Lesson Plans

Capturing the Reader With Vivid Images

Lesson 2 for *Mr. John and the Day of Knowledge*

Subject(s): **Language Arts & Literature, Social Studies & Geography, Cross-Cultural Understanding**

Region / Country: **Central & Eastern Europe / Ukraine**

Grade Level(s): **6–8, 9–12**

Related Publication: **Uncommon Journeys**

Overview

Students will examine how the author tries to capture the reader's imagination immediately, through imagery--and hold on to it.

Background Information

About the Story

In the prologue to his memoir, Deever explains why he characterizes Ukraine in his title as the heavy side of the world—for its diet, its industry, its weather, its economic and social conditions, even its humor. He ends with a paean to the resiliency of Ukrainians, who, despite all their burdens, keep on singing and surviving.

"Mr. John and the Day of Knowledge" details the author's first day on the job at a school in newly independent Ukraine. His initial anxieties, the kinds of jitters shared by most new teachers, were complicated by his limited language proficiency (he had 10 weeks of language training before arriving at his Peace Corps post) and the cultural differences to which he had to adapt. He gives the reader a description of September First, the "Day of Knowledge" in Ukraine, when students and teachers join to celebrate the re-opening of school. The second part of the story details his observations of a master teacher, Svetlana Adamovna, as she struggles to revise her annual pro-Lenin First Lesson in the wake of the new Ukrainian politics. To learn more about Peace Corps Volunteers in Ukraine, visit the country-information section of the Peace Corps website at www.peacecorps.gov.

Students will find more meaning in this story if they understand the geographical, social, and political context of Ukraine. They should be able to locate Ukraine on a world map and understand Lenin's role in the establishment of Russian communism and the former Soviet Union. They should also be familiar with events surrounding the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. Finally, they should understand the mission of the Peace Corps and the role of a Peace Corps Volunteer.

About the Setting

Ukraine, a country of 233,000 square miles (somewhat smaller than Texas) with a population of almost 50 million, lies between Russia and Poland, just north of the Black Sea. Although its diverse ethnic population—Ukrainians, Russians, Belarusians, Moldovans, Bulgarians, Poles, Hungarians, Romanians, Crimean Tatars—speak many languages, Ukrainian and Russian are the most common. The government has made the teaching of English a priority so that Ukraine may be better able to participate in the global economy.

Ukraine's long history has been turbulent. In 1240 the Mongols, led by the grandson of Genghis Khan, attacked Kiev—today's capital of Ukraine—and controlled the region for nearly two centuries. In the wake of Mongol domination, Ukraine was invaded and ruled by Poland, Lithuania, Russia, and others. A Cossack uprising in Ukraine led to the country's liberation in 1648. Ukraine signed a treaty with Russia in 1654, which led to subjugation by the Russian Empire and ultimately by the Soviet Union. Stalin tried to stamp out Ukrainian nationalism in 1932 and 1933 by collecting grain and starving nearly 10 million Ukrainians, in what is known as the Great Famine. In 1991, following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Ukraine achieved independence.

Not all Ukrainians welcomed their independence from Russia. And at a time when the entire educational system was trying to implement Ukrainian as the language of instruction, there was also a growing demand

from parents and students for increased instruction in English. Taken together, these factors placed incredible strain upon an already stretched educational system.

In response to Ukraine's educational initiatives, the Peace Corps launched its TEFL project (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) in Ukraine in September 1993. Deever belonged to one of the first groups of Peace Corps Volunteers assigned to teach English in Ukraine. Today, about 80 Volunteers work in the TEFL project to expand and improve the quality of English instruction in schools and at teacher training institutions—and to assist in developing new English teaching materials for primary and secondary schools. Volunteers also work in the areas of small business development and environmental protection.

Objectives

- To evaluate the author's lead metaphor as an opening to the story
- To identify vivid images and analyze why they are effective

Vocabulary

- Squelch: To suppress; push down
- Spindly: Long or tall and thin
- Pinafore: Sleeveless clothing, like an apron, that young girls wear over a dress
- *Amerikanets*: Ukrainian for "an American"
- Rudimentary: Basic
- Idolatry: Worship, usually of a false god
- Queen's English: Spoken English of the upper class in Great Britain
- Yaroslav the Wise: Grand Prince of Kiev in the 11th century; a Ukrainian historical hero who strengthened the borders of his kingdom and made Kiev a center of culture and learning
- Semaphore: A flag used for signaling
- Disdain: To look down upon
- Sanitize: To clean up or remove undesirable things
- Patronymic: A Russian or Ukrainian person's name, based on the name of that person's father. For example, Svetlana Adamovna's father's name was Adam.
- Connotations: Associations, additional meanings, or overtones connected with a word
- Borsch (or borscht): Beet soup

Featured Reading(s)

- [Mr. John and the Day of Knowledge](#) by John Deever

Materials

- [Map of Ukraine](#)

Procedures

1. Have students share their journal entries in a class discussion. Ask the class to address why seeing the world from another culture's point of view can be important.
2. Read aloud the first paragraph of "Mr. John and the Day of Knowledge." Discuss with students why Deever thinks the first day of school is like a high dive. Examine further the comparison between the diver and the teacher or student on the first day of school:
 - What does the pool represent?
 - What would be the equivalent of a perfect 10 dive?
 - What would be the equivalent of a belly flop? A cannonball?
 - Who is the audience?

Encourage students to think of additional ways to extend the comparison.

Ask students to comment on how effective they think Deever's metaphor is for opening his story. Does it help Deever capture the reader's attention? If so, how? How would the story be different without it?

Remind students that enticing imagery appeals to the senses. Suggest that if an author is successful in his or her use of imagery, readers can close their eyes and form a strong mental image of what the author has described. Ask the students whether the diving image functions that way for them.

- Ask students to review the first part of the story to look for images Deever has created (e.g., the older boy carrying the tiny first-grade girl on his shoulders as she rings the "First Bell"; Svetlana Adamovna's "tall, white beehive of a hairdo"; "the blur of rustling flowers ... droopy yellow daffodils or stiff pink carnations").
- Now ask the class what makes these images vivid. [Answers might include: Some images use strong, concrete nouns; others vivid, active verbs; others richly descriptive adjectives; and still others, striking comparisons—similes or metaphors.] Ask students in a brief activity to write a few rich images for their classmates to imagine. To help them get started, suggest they think about scenes or experiences that they found exciting, surprising, alarming, magnificent, sad, or funny—or something in which they have been triumphant (e.g., the first time they rode a two-wheeler successfully; a time they overcame fright to accomplish something). Encourage them to be original, avoiding common or overused imagery. When everyone has a few images written, ask individuals to share some of their images with the rest of the class.

Framework and Standards

Enduring Understandings

- Serving in another culture challenges one to understand the world from that culture's point of view.
- People of different cultures differ in their approaches to teaching and their attitudes toward learning.

Essential Questions

- How do our cultural values shape our attitudes toward teaching and learning?

Standards

English Standards: 3, 6

Social Studies Standards: I, IV, IX

National Geography Standards: 6, 10

For more information on the standards in *Uncommon Journeys*, [see the Appendix](#) (pdf—160 KB)