



## **Creating F(r)iction in the Classroom**

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### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The goal of F(r)iction, Brink Literacy's literary anthology, is to raise unique voices, broaden readers' understanding of topics, and to challenge the audience to think critically about what they read and the world around them; the goal of the new, accompanying curriculum, F(r)iction in the Classroom, is the same. The MAP Challenge was to create and write F(r)iction in the Classroom using the literary anthology as a close reading text for comprehension and critical thinking, a mentor text for writing skills and styles, as an exercise in editorial perspectives, and as inspiration for students' own writing.

### **CHALLENGE:**

Brink Literacy revolves around the heart, impact, and life-changing art of storytelling and all its moving parts. Since its inception, Brink Literacy has strived to provide educational opportunities for many populations. The literary anthology, F(r)iction, is used as a mentor text in writing workshops at high-security prisons; university partnerships assist students interested in writing, publishing, or editing careers; a partnership with MindSpark Learning offers a storytelling professional development course for educators; and Brink works with other humanitarian nonprofits to reach and represent diverse communities from around the world. These are just a few of Brink Literacy's initiatives. The next one – the one for the MAP Challenge – will impact yet another population.

The MAP Challenge for Brink Literacy was to create a curriculum for high school and college classrooms using F(r)iction, known as F(r)iction in the Classroom. Everything that Brink had done in the past was setting them up for this moment. The heart of the organization was clear, its mission was inspiring, its past experiences showed success, and F(r)iction itself was a brilliant publication. The groundwork for formalizing a curriculum was already on the table; the next steps were to lay it out in a way that would be useful and implementable for teachers. The aim of creating F(r)iction in the Classroom was to literally create friction in the classroom: to debate opinions and motivations, open students' minds, challenge conventions they took for granted, think critically about unique voices, and be inspired for their own creations.

The initial idea for F(r)iction in the Classroom was to write the curriculum so it would be accessible for high school and college classrooms. After some research as part of our COVID pivot, we learned that although high schools are not the right market for this curriculum at the moment, the college market was, in fact, ready. Thanks to editor-in-chief Dani Hedlund, F(r)iction's reputation preceded itself and college professors were eager to pilot this new curriculum, so we focused our efforts on planning for the college population, with some sidebar high school planning in the mix when it was appropriate.

## **APPROACH:**

Dani and I both had ideas about what the curriculum would need, but the most important people we could talk to would be the people delivering it: educators. We started by doing a bit of market research on what teachers would want or need in a new curriculum. We learned that college professors have a lot more freedom with the books they use and fewer budget constraints when it came to buying books or curriculum. High schools had a much more rigorous and lengthy vetting process for new literature to be used in classrooms, and during the time of COVID, teachers were in no position – personally or professionally – to take on the project of pushing a new curriculum through a school board, to pilot something brand new when standards were trying to be met virtually, or to ask schools for more money for books or curriculum. Further, high school educators were rightly concerned about engaging students, who didn't know the teacher or each other, virtually with literature designed to create debate, passion, dissent, and reflection. After hearing what high school teachers had to say, Dani and I decided to focus on a college-level curriculum for composition and creative writing classes.

After choosing our audience, we began to discuss what the final product should look like: What do college-level classes need? What components should be included? How much of the class is unpacking the text and how much is writing? What about the kids interested in the publishing industry? What tips can we offer that make the class more engaging? What will the curriculum page look like and how much room do we really have? To help answer some of these questions, I met with some other Brink team members that could help guide me in the right direction and further solidified the vision for the curriculum. After a few iterations and drafts, we came up with a workable model. We also decided that eventually we would like to involve the authors themselves, since they would have deep insight and unique ideas on what the curriculum should include.

After we decided on the format and components, I had the immense joy of reading the Monsters issue of F(r)iction and writing the curriculum for it. I wanted the discussion and writing prompts to be more than basic comprehension questions; I wanted students to look further into the character's background, to recognize different perspectives, to make connections, to reflect on how pieces both did and didn't fit into students' previous schemas, and to evaluate motivations and turning points. I tried to look at the pieces from both a professor and student point of view, finding small, yet vital sentences and broad, but poignant themes. I also tried to find other ways for students to engage with the curriculum, providing strategies for movement around the classroom, ideas for teamwork, and opportunities to include the visual arts.

Writing a curriculum is a learning process from start to finish. As more people look at it, components are tweaked, elements are added, wording is changed, ideas are flushed out, and we realize things we forgot – that's all part of the approach and process. It's impossible to approach curriculum as a "one-and-done" deal, because there will constantly be elements that need adjustment. The practical approach of doing market research, taking meetings, defining a deliverable, and writing drafts of the curriculum is important, but approaching curriculum-writing in the spirit of flexibility, openness, feedback, and improvement is also a vital piece.

## **OPPORTUNITY:**

The F(r)iction in the Classroom curriculum will allow Brink Literacy to reach a wider array of readers. Although F(r)iction already has a large reader base and is used in some classrooms,

the curriculum will expand the reader base even more by getting F(r)iction into the hands of students, and it will provide educators with a guide to using F(r)iction in the classroom, eventually in differentiated formats for high school and college. The curriculum will help educators approach F(r)iction from multiple angles, thereby forwarding Brink's aims to spark critical thinking in readers, inspire an interest in storytelling, and ignite an interest in publishing.

The first iteration of F(r)iction in the Classroom curriculum used F(r)iction #16: Monsters, so all the content revolves around this central topic of monsters. In deciding on the components, categories, question types, and style for the Monsters curriculum, we essentially created a jumping-off point and format for what future F(r)iction in the Classroom curriculum will include. There are plans to eventually incorporate authors in the curriculum design and to create a curriculum specifically focused on the industry side of F(r)iction and Brink Literacy. The MAP Challenge and subsequent solution built a basis for an implementable curriculum product, provided a prototype for more curriculum moving forward, and illuminated logical next steps.

## **RESULTS & FUTURE PLAN:**

In six months, we were able to create a comprehensive first draft of the curriculum. My project will conclude with accompanying curriculum for each of the 16 stories found within F(r)iction #16: Monsters. Since success is usually based on student outcomes, there currently isn't a way to judge success of the curriculum right now. Eventually, there will be follow-up surveys to evaluate student performance and engagement and professor satisfaction.

The next steps for the organization will be to edit and fine-tune the curriculum for public consumption, print up the materials, get it into the hands of professors, and, in a few months, follow-up with the pilot programs for feedback and evaluation. Later on down the line, hopefully, a team will figure out how to work with authors, proceed with mapping out what the high school version of F(r)iction in the Classroom looks like, and start working on creating a curriculum for the other issues of F(r)iction. Creating a curriculum for F(r)iction is valuable because it is useful to teachers and engaging for students, plus there are already other issues of F(r)iction to start writing curriculum for and more coming all the time. There is no limit of possibilities for F(r)iction in the Classroom, and I am excited to see how it moves forward after the conclusion of the MAP Fellowship.

**Learn more about Brink Literacy Project at [brinkl.it/org](http://brinkl.it/org).**