In the young adult novel What Happened to Lani Garver (2004), the young Lani explains to his new friend, Claire, that “when people realize you can see past their eyes and into their heads . . . they don’t take kindly to that,” since no one would like it much if someone “started looking inside your head at your hidden garbage” (p. 48). Lani explains to Claire that people like her who are “most afraid of their own thoughts spend half their lives with their arms crossed” and that she could do herself a great favor by finding a psychiatrist. When Claire lowers her body from Lani’s direct gaze and avoids eye contact with him, he explains to her that she has just performed another version of the “defensive stance” (p. 49).

This ability to read people and understand the contexts in which they express their choices is one of the founts of experience that young people bring to learning sites. Any teacher able to identify this talent and use it to bridge students’ journeys to new experiences can facilitate it by adding different kinds of expertise to their skills in reading as an active process (Brooks & Brooks, 1993; Freire & Macedo, 1987; Langer, 1992; Probst, 1988; Rosenblatt, 1938). Such an approach to reading and communicating effectively supports the idea that Wallowitz (2007) described in her observation that education can serve more interests than simply being a means to socialize and control students, leaving the poor, minority and learning disabled in the margins.

I have a selection of music scores that have been collected over the years. They include scores by J. Rosamund Johnson, George Harrison, Claude-Michel Schönberg, Arthur Herzog and Billie Holiday, and Keith Christopher. Students are also encouraged to find music scores from musicals such as Hair (Ragni & Rado, 1967), which has recently made a comeback as a successful Broadway show. The lyrics in this show help students understand the way that history was documented in a non-print communication system. My student teachers were surprised to find a wealth of social commentary in the way that the Vietnam War was used as background for the social upheaval that was going on in the country at the time that the musical was written. The new teachers also find other themes and events described in lyrics as they research the topics that they have to teach in their
content areas. Many websites offer choices for the study of physical education, social studies, art, business, music and health education.

The students are invited to work in pairs or trios as they scan pages with musical notation. They must take note of the patterns that they observe and make some sense of the message that the patterns are communicating. For example, if a page has more single notes appearing together more often than the series of notes joined together, there may be a meaning behind that order of presentation. Students create a story grammar with beginning, middle, and end, which they feel represents the message being communicated by the pattern of the symbols, or notes on the page, that they have to study.

In one workshop a duet working together on a page of the score decided that they had far more small symbols standing alongside each other than any other notes on the page. They created a story about the relationship between this long line of single notes that were more powerful and the two fat notes that were hooked together at the bottom. They were asked, “Who are you and what are you doing here?” In response, they told a story about being crowded into a housing area where they did not have much room to do anything outside their small apartments. The feeling they got from watching all those quarter notes, lonely figures, lined up one after another on the page, was claustrophobic, as though they needed to break out from the uniform lines that oppressed them on the page. Each of the characters depicted had a story that matched the general description of people striving to overcome their immediate environment.

After the two students stood in a tableau, representing one person trying to get away from the other, they were invited to start improvising lines in a conversation. Their dialogue represented the struggle between two people who were having an intense argument. One person was insisting that the other one stay in the place where they were having the conversation. The argument became more intense as the actors began to make physical actions that demonstrated their conflict. We soon asked them to freeze in the tableau that first initiated the conversation in the improvised scene.

The challenge of this part of the workshop is to keep students focused on the attitude that the characters present – that is, angry, happy, sad, reluctant, bossy – while they make up lines to advance a conversation with another character. When a character has to initiate a conversation or respond to another person in the chosen attitude, he or she may not switch out of that persona. The idea is to respond to the input in the conversation while maintaining the belief that “I am that attitude.” This requires the students to keep their body and voice in a position different from normal, and advance both the conversation and the mood of the improvised situation at the same time.

THE WORKSHOP: INTO THE PICTURE

1. Participants choose a character from the image presented.
2. Bullet-list the “character” that you can pick out, that is, people, things, colors, setting.