

# LIFE LINKS

Okay, so I was desperate for an activity for the last day before Winter Break. My older sister, a former kindergarten teacher, said I should have my students make paper chains. No, I'm a high school English teacher; I couldn't do that –

Or could I?

My average level English 10 students had just completed a short “Coming-of-Age” unit. They had read Sandra Cisneros's *House on Mango Street*, completing study guides, journals, and a creative project. They had also viewed and discussed Esmeralda Santiago's *Almost a Woman*. Between the two works, I had led a discussion about the components that coming-of-age stories often share, basing my remarks largely on information from the *ExxonMobil Masterpiece Theatre: The Road from Coorain* website. Maybe paper chains COULD be a way to link the stories found in the book, the videotape, and their lives.

Prior to class, I made signs for some of the components of a coming-of-age story; each component was listed on a different color of construction paper. Because I had a limited assortment of colors, I used the following five (5) categories: home and everyday life, family and friends, gender roles and romance, education and the arts, and rebellion. A sixth color was designated a “wild card,” which the students would use for two (2) additional categories of their choice. I posted the signs and assembled sheets of colored paper, rulers, glue sticks, scissors, and markers for the students.

When the students came to class, I gave them given directions printed on a strip of paper. They were to measure and cut three (3) 1½" by 9" strips from each color sheet, six (6) strips from the "wild card" color. To create their paper chains, for each color/category they had to write an example from the book on one strip, from the videotape on another, and from their lives on the third. They could then glue the links together and move on to another color/category until they had fashioned their complete chain of 21 links. As they began working, I could hear them asking each other about the stories, sometimes needing help for an example or two, and comparing their own life experiences. After class, I evaluated their links, connected all the chains into one very long train, and then draped everything in layers over a bulletin board. When the students returned from Winter Break, they saw the colorful result of their work. Students from other classes also noticed the chains and asked about them; a few curious students were even seen reading some of the links.

Thus, my students were literally able to link two coming-of-age stories to their own lives. In the future, I may expand this activity to cover different components or more works or both. For now, I feel it was a constructive way to spend part of a winter's day.

## Resources

*Almost a Woman*. Screenplay by Esmeralda Santiago. Dir. Betty Kaplan. ALT Films for ExxonMobil Masterpiece Theatre, 2002. Videocassette. PBS Home Video, 2002.

Cisneros, Sandra. *The House on Mango Street*. New York: Vintage Books, 1991.

*ExxonMobil Masterpiece Theatre: The Road From Coorain: The Coming of Age Story: Discussion Questions and Activities*. 4 Oct. 2002 <[http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/masterpiece/coorain/tg\\_comingofage.html](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/masterpiece/coorain/tg_comingofage.html)>.

*ExxonMobil Masterpiece Theatre: The American Collection: Almost a Woman: Teacher's Guide*. 4 Oct. 2002 <<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/masterpiece/americancollection/woman/tguide.html>>.

Santiago, Esmeralda. *Almost a Woman*. New York: Vintage Books, 1999.