

Systems Thinking Applications in the English Classroom:

Developing Character Analysis Using the Ladder of Connectedness and Causal Loops

By Stephanie DiCarlo

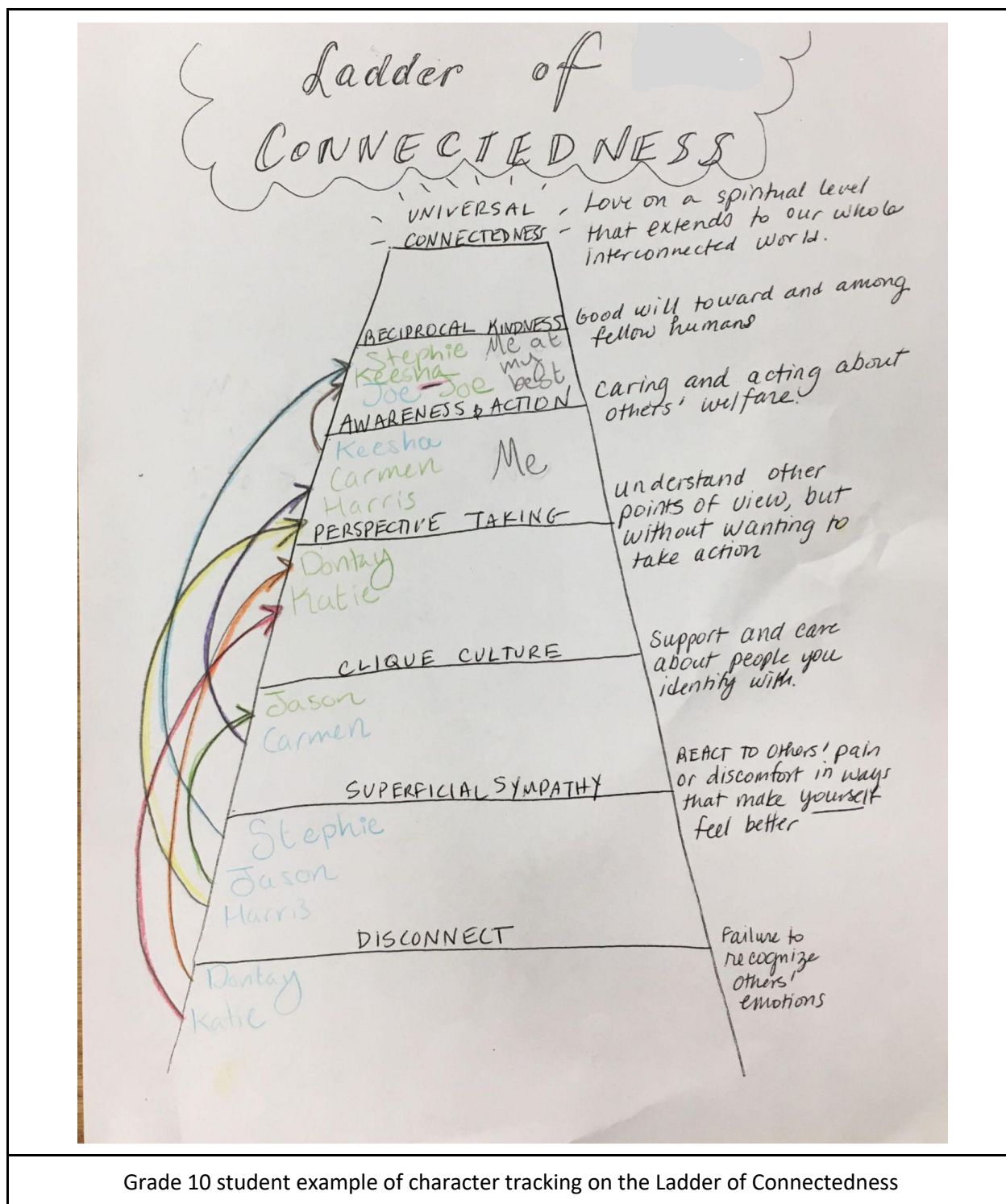
When teaching analysis in my Poetry Workshop, I introduce my students to systems thinking tools that will help them contextualize and connect elements of life and literature. I've found that conceptual modeling helps my English students to structure and expand both their thinking and their writing.

This past fall, my poetry students read Helen Frost's novel-in-verse, *Keesha's House*, which highlights the voices of seven isolated teenagers experiencing hardships that result from their experiences in foster care, juvenile court, and other social and familial systems. Before reading, I introduced the ladder of connectedness, part of the Compassionate Systems project with MIT's J-WEL World Education Lab ([Senge, slides 7-17](#)). I've adapted some of the original language for my ninth and tenth graders.



We began with the slides attached below, discussing a series of statements and developing definitions that describe each rung: *disconnect*, *superficial sympathy*, *clique culture*, *perspective taking*, *awareness and action*, *reciprocal kindness*, and *universal connectedness*, then used the statements on the slides to develop working definitions together as a class.

As we read, students observed the characters' relationships, tracked related quotations, and noted instances that show growth or change. Upon completion, I asked them to revisit their notes, decide who in the story experienced the most and least change, and write letters (see worksheet below) to the two characters offering kudos or advice based on their growth. They were able to produce well-developed and textually-supported character analysis, which came easily because they could lean on the structure of the ladder.



Tenth grade student Casper DeLuca used this exercise to write a detailed character letter that begins:

Dear Katie,

You've made so much progress up the ladder of connectedness... In the start of the book, you were very closed off, and understandably. Your trauma from the death of your father and the abuse from your stepfather led you to be disconnected. Like you said in the first chapter, "[That] room [was] dark and musty, but it's one place / [you did] know [you could] answer no when someone [knocked]" (Frost 15). The freedom of having your own room both saved you and isolated you. You were physically safe, but alone with no support.

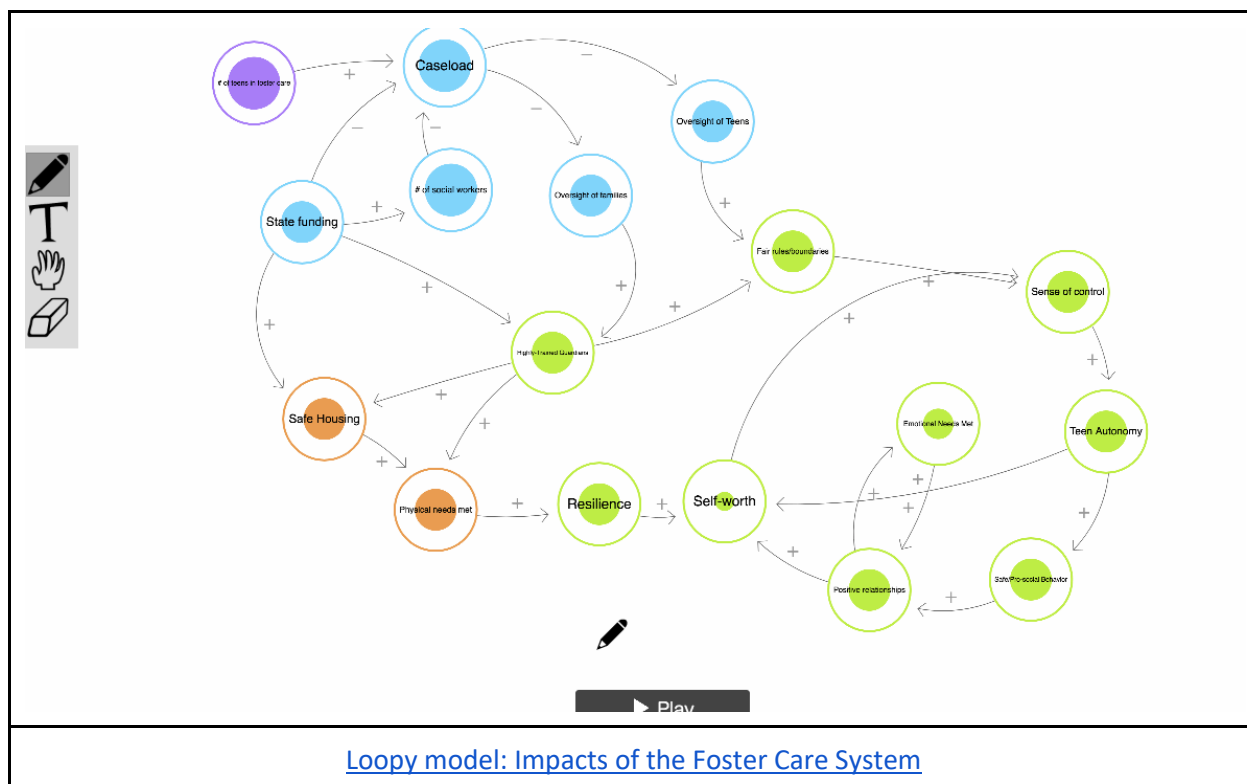
Casper goes on to explain key moments that catalyze Katie's change and growth, and closes with this analysis:

At the end of the poem you say, "That shell/ was finding heartbeats in this house: sister/sister/brother/friend" (Frost 99). Not related by blood, but connected by the universality of life being hard. It's true for everyone in many different ways but you found connection and solace in the knowledge that you're not alone, and not only that, but safe. Like Harris says and you agree with, "Home is in your mind," (Frost 108)...You can see how you go from complete disconnect to reciprocal kindness on the border of universal connectedness. You made a lot of progress and in the process, found your support and your home.

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Once students have identified where the characters' interpersonal connections developed or broke down in the story, we progress to asking why. A causal loop diagram is helpful for analyzing different variables that reinforce or balance one another, and ultimately, how they impact the characters. For example: the character Dontay finds himself homeless after he is locked out of his foster home for breaking curfew. By mapping out and connecting variables in the system, students visualize how and why he is in this difficult situation. The following model, made using the tool [Loopy](#), allows users to manipulate the different factors that impact Dontay in the story. They can color code related components and also adjust the size of the colored circles to scale the impact of changing each factor. When they run the model, they can increase or decrease any of the variables and observe the effects as it plays out on the rest of the model. For example, the model below shows how changes in caseloads for social workers ripple through, impacting oversight and screening for potential foster families, and affecting outcomes for children like Dontay in the story, who rely on the foster care system.



After completing our analysis as a class, I gave students this prompt: *“Helen Frost’s Keesha’s House explores the lives of a group of struggling teenagers. Select one character from the story and explore how the character deals with challenges caused by both relationships and systems. Reflect on how this character’s experience is important to the meaning or message of the book as a whole.”* The essay (see below) completed by grade 9 student Aaron Kimaru, demonstrates how modeling connections between characters as well as the systems they inhabit can lead to deep understanding of character growth and thematic significance. He argues: *“Throughout the poetry collection, Dontay struggles with his foster family relationships and the foster care system. Dontay’s conflict connects to the theme of alienation and exemplifies the author’s message of the story: that everyone deserves a place to stay.”* He

develops his writing by adding supporting examples and discussing how the character's development throughout his ordeal reinforces the story's theme and the author's purpose.

In reflecting on this project, I found that pairing the Ladder of Connectedness with causal loop diagrams was a helpful way to visualize the characters' adaptations to systemic challenges and their relationships with one another. In class discussions, students reported feeling connected to the characters and interested in their outcomes; this investment was also evident in the quality and depth of their writing. In addition to developing strong composition and analytical skills, projects like these — that connect literary themes to real-world situations — offer opportunities for students to develop greater understanding of our world and envision ways to become better global citizens.

Worksheet

Name:

Poetry Workshop

Date:

Keesha's House

Moving Up the Ladder of Connectedness: Character Growth in *Keesha's House*

Step 1: In **BLUE**, place each major character (and minor characters, if you find this to be relevant) where you believe they belonged on the ladder of connectedness at the beginning of the book.

Step 2: in **GREEN**, place the same characters on the ladder where you believe they belong at the end of the book.

Step 3: Draw an arrow from blue to green to show how each character moved.

Step 4: Choose one character who you felt made a significant stride toward the top of the ladder. Write the character a letter that describes the growth and development you noticed. Make sure to mention specific examples, actions, and relationships that made you feel this way.

Step 5: Choose one character who you do not think experienced much growth or change. Write that character a note offering advice on how to foster more positive relationships and stronger connections to others.



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Essay Example

Grade 9 Student

Ms. DiCarlo

Poetry Workshop

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The Impact of Relationships and Systems in Helen Frost's *Keesha's House*

In literature as in life, we often push people away because we're afraid of letting them down. *Keesha's House*, by Helen Frost, is a story about seven teenagers experiencing seemingly impossible situations. Dontay is a character who struggles to find a house that feels like home and a family that loves him, no matter who's in it. **Throughout the poetry collection, Dontay struggles with his foster family relationships and the foster care system. Dontay's conflict connects to the theme of alienation and exemplifies the author's main message of the story that everyone deserves a place to stay.**

One way Dontay's foster family-related conflict is complicated is through his relationship with his foster family. While he doesn't want to tell his caseworker that he doesn't like his new family and be put back into the foster care system, he doesn't get along with his foster family and he feels like they treat him differently than their other kids. When he's thinking about how his foster parents treat him, Dontay says, "I might do somethin' about this someday how in my foster home I'm like a pet they know they can get rid of if I get ornery" (Frost 106). Dontay explains how in his foster home he is treated like their pet, but he tries his best to hold up until he can reunite with his parents. Dontay realizes that he is

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worthy of a home which connects to the theme of the story on the front cover which says, “everyone deserves a place to stay. ”

Another factor impacting Dontay’s feeling of alienation is not being taken care of by his caseworker and the foster care system as a whole. When his case worker takes him out to meet a nice couple that could be his future foster parents, he suspects they will all just treat him the same. It seems his case worker doesn't realize what Dontay wants, only what she thinks he needs, a place far from his old school, a nice family of his race, with a home and a pool out in the suburbs. When he’s reflecting on how his caseworker, Mrs. Mason doesn't understand him, Dontay says, “It’s too many times now [Mrs. Mason] takes me out to meet some *nice couple*, tries to cheer me up with all her talk about good family times. Couple of weeks or months go by, phone rings again, I’m on my way. Nope I’m playin’ this low-key keepin’ quiet” (Frost 51). Dontay explains that he doesn't want to keep doing this, meeting with a supposedly nice family, realizing that they're not as good as they seem, being trapped in that home, and his caseworker thinking he is the problem when he keeps not liking his new foster family. Dontay recognizes that he deserves a good, loving family, and that he deserves a place to stay with people who support and respect him.

Dontay’s problems, which originated from bad relationships and an undependable foster care system, possibly could have made his life way harder than it already is, but his skills of flexibility and understanding of how to keep himself safe have brought him to find solutions he can manage and be content with, especially when he realizes that he doesn't get along with his foster parents and they don't treat him well. He chooses to hop between

different places to sleep. And when one of them becomes unsafe he, with the help of Tobias, finds a new place that won't be so risky until his parents are freed. Dontay's life experiences connect to the book's message because it shows how he learns to persevere and strategically maneuver through his tough situations. Through her characters' struggles and growth, Helen Frost implies that when systems like foster care break down, resilience and perseverance, and a little help from others, can lead one to success.