



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
2002 Volume IV: The Craft of Writing

Introduction

The seminar in “The Craft of Writing” was, in effect, a writing workshop. We read other writers and discussed their strategies. We wrote short pieces of various kinds and received each other’s appreciative and critical comments. And we tried to spend more than the usual amount of time in discussing the process of writing curriculum units.

We began our reading with Charles C. Mann’s challenging essay about the history of our continent, “1491,” in *The Atlantic Monthly*, a brief essay by Pat Schneider in *Heron Dance*, and some poems by Roque Dalton and Jimmy Santiago Baca. We ended by selecting essays of interest from a current issue of *The New Yorker* -and spending most of our time talking about Louis Menand’s beautifully nuanced profile of Maya Lin, “The Reluctant Memorialist.” Between the beginning and the end, our lengthier texts provided us with a range of quite different modes of writing. Each, in some respect, was about the process of writing and how writing may express and clarify our experience. We read Anne Lamott’s *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*, Ken Wilber’s *No Boundary: Eastern and Western Approaches to Personal Growth*, and Mary Oliver’s book-length poem, *The Leaf and the Cloud*. We also read portions of *A Cynthia Ozick Reader*, edited by Elaine M. Kauvar, and Vicki Hearne’s *Adam’s Task: Calling Animals by Name*. And, for a different approach to the techniques of narrative and description, we looked at some chapters from Michael Chabon’s prize-winning novel *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*.

Our short pieces of writing included some stylistic exercises, in which we emulated strategies used by Lamott, Wilber, and Ozick; some vigorous responses to the work of those and other writers; and a fairly wide range of prose sketches, poems, and chapters from novels-in-progress. We also spent a good deal of time offering suggestions to each other after reading the first drafts of the curriculum units.

Those curriculum units bring certain principles of writing-and of teaching and learning-to bear upon a remarkably various array of school settings. Each unit in its own way shares the seminar’s concern to elicit authentic writing that comes from the live experience of the students. Though we never mentioned the name of the philosopher John Dewey in our seminar, his spirit hovered over our efforts.

Robert P. Echter, in “Learning Writing in the Context of ‘Inclusion,’” emphasizes the importance of friendly and familial relationships to the learning of writing, especially for students in grades 1-4 who are eligible for special education service. His unit therefore points toward a likely range of quite individual and in some respects unpredictable transactions with students, other teachers, and parents. Shirley Goldberg, in “The First Six Weeks: A Writing Guide for Third Grade Bilingual Class,” brings together a range of specific strategies that she has tested with bilingual students who are learning to write English, some of whom may not be literate in their first language.

The next three curriculum units, by members of a team from Vincent E. Mauro Elementary School, aim to help students to become successful in writing through classes in Social Development, Social Studies, and Physical Education. Andrea Bailey, in “The Inner Voice: Writing as a Tool to Control Anger in the Classroom,” seeks through detailed exercises in writing to engage, clarify, and modify the emotions of her third grade students. Her unit is designed to work with the prevention program, *Project Charlie*. Christine Picón Van Duzer’s “The Craft of Writing through Narrative History” is, like Shirley Goldberg’s unit, intended for bilingual students in third grade. But it uses autobiographical narratives by young people and family stories, such as Carmen Lomas Garza’s *Family Pictures/Cuadros de familia*, to provide material that will elicit writing from the students. Joseph J. Raffone takes on the challenging task described in his title: “Integrating the Craft of Writing into Physical Education.” He proposes to lead his fifth grade students in Physical Education through a sequence of writing that will include journals, acrostic poems, short story compositions, and finally an interview modeled on those seen on ESPN’s Sportscenter.

The next three curriculum units direct their attention to the upper grades. Sean Griffin’s unit, “Writers as Artists, Artists as Writers; Response to Literature and Visual Arts,” is intended for an eighth grade English class in an arts magnet school. He will lead students through responses to a range of visual art toward an engagement both visual and literary with the work of James Thurber and Edgar Allan Poe-and compositions about their work. Judith Goodrich’s unit, “Improving Writing Skills in an American History Classroom,” is intended for an eighth grade class in that subject. It makes use of an array of analytical and expository strategies, along with mapping and electronic resources, as it aims to elicit vigorous writing from students about American history. Finally, Leigh Highbridge’s unit, “A Theater Workshop to Improve Character Development and Collaboration Skills,” is also quite centrally a unit on the craft of writing. This sequence for ninth grade theater students at an arts and humanities magnet school begins with exercises in writing that are usually found in a vocational preparation situation, and it culminates in a production to be written, designed, and performed by the class.

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