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Teaching Voice through Latina and African American Literature

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Hey World!!

You don't want to hear me, I'll make you hear me.

You don't want to see me, I'll make you see me.

- Piri Thomas - Aloud

Introduction

The Importance of Teaching and Identifying Voice

Words hold incredible power and strength. Often people speak before thinking and can send the wrong message; this is especially true in any discussion of race or gender. However, the written word can hold more power than anything we can verbalize. The deliberate act of putting word on paper suggests the writer has purposely chosen each and every word to send his/her readers a particular message. Writers must work hard and with great care when establishing the voice the world will hear as they read. Educators and scholars cannot discount the importance of understanding a writer's voice in interpreting literature and understanding where a writer comes from. This is where my curriculum unit, **Teaching Voice through Latina and African American Literature** truly gets its basis.

Those in the literary world define voice in several ways. It can be defined as the rhythm and sound of an author's words. This rhythm and sound comes from the word choice and fluency of those chosen words. Voice is essential in the tone and mood an author is looking to establish. These literary elements are key in drawing readers in and keeping them involved in literature.

Voice can also be coupled with the message and viewpoint coming from an author as well as the author's ethnic, racial and/or social identification. Modern writers want their voices heard loud and clear in order for society to know what is happening in his/her area of the world from his/her particular ethnic, social or racial

viewpoint. For example, the women in Ntozake Shange's work *For Colored Girls Who Have Thought of Suicide/When the Rainbow is Enuf* , convey their experiences as women living in Chicago, New York and other inner city areas. The reader senses the urgency and despair the women face.

Voice is therefore not limited to the literary definition. As people read and discuss literature, they have voices that are in their minds asking questions and challenging ideas. It is those voices that can be the catalyst for new views and opinions. The students will get an opportunity during this curriculum unit to study and work with the voices they hear as they read. Barry Lane writes in his book, *Writing as a Road to Self Discovery* that when we understand the forces surrounding us and our experiences (and in turn those of writers) it is "the beginning of self knowledge" (Lane 145). Attaining self knowledge is a lifelong process. Ideally, this curriculum unit will play a small part in allowing students a chance to read and write about events that they can relate to and continue on their journey of self knowledge.

As teachers, we certainly have enough to teach our students to prepare them for standardized tests and college applications. Initially, voice just seemed a natural choice for me to research because we all are seeking to be "heard". By identifying what others are saying we might be able to relate our own experience. During this research, I came upon another passage in *Writing as a Road to Self Discovery* , which opened my eyes a little more to the value of voice. Lane writes, "Every story has a voice that speaks to the teller whenever they tell it. Listening and examining the tone of that voice can help us find the truth of the story" (Lane 146). Truth is truly what speaks to the reader. In the poems selected and suggested in the unit, we analyze the writer's truth through word choice and placement and ultimately, through writing the students will discover their own voice as well as their own truth. In the end, that is more than any teacher could ask for.

This curriculum unit will be a journey through writing and reading. In High School Language Arts classes, students are required to read literature that is usually far removed from their daily lives. Young people, especially urban youth, can rarely find someone to identify with in the usually repertoire of high school literature. Although Ethan Frome may be a compelling tragic hero, his plight has become dated and easily solved by the modern high school student. Classic and historical literature is essential and necessary in developing a students' literary canon; as teachers we can also expose our students to writers who reflect their experience and are reflective of the time in which we are living.

Teaching Voice through Latina and Female African American Writers is a curriculum unit designed to engage high school juniors and seniors in reading and writing while developing their own sense of voice. The unit is designed to be used during the third or fourth quarter of the school year. It is adaptable for all levels in the classroom. Teachers can choose to do more in class reading for struggling readers or more in-depth, independent reading for advanced readers. The curriculum unit can be used over the course of two or three weeks depending on whether the school has block scheduling.

As a teacher at Hill Regional Career Magnet High School, I designed this unit to utilize as much of the 82 minute block class as possible. Career is a magnet school where students follow either a business/computer track or a health/medical track. The tracks are like a "major" with specific requirements for graduation. The make up of Career High School is that of African American, Latino, Asian, Caucasian and many other ethnicities. Students are from New Haven as well as the suburbs surrounding New Haven. Each student comes to the classroom with a different perspective and a different experience. Many students can relate to the plight of a person struggling to have his or her voice heard and they can relate to being on the outside looking in. A great number of our Hispanic students come to us with English as a second language and know the value and strength of words.

Students will develop their voice during a series of writing and reading activities. A key element in this unit is the focus on writing by Latina and African American women. This may seem like a narrow focus but there is certainly a wealth of information and voice to be heard. Great Latina writers such as Sandra Cisneros and Julia Alvarez and African American women such as Ntozake Shange and Nikki Giovanni have been writing for decades searching for a place to begin expressing themselves. They tell the tales of women of color; normally the unheard in the social, political and literary world.

One goal is to teach students about literary voice through the reading of modern writers highlighting the Latina and African American female experience. Another goal would be to have students' walk away feeling that literature is something they can connect to and actually write. This connection will have the students writing and creating their own personal voice and "truth".

Students will read and write over the course of the unit. Initially, we will begin by defining literary voice and identifying it in poetry of Nikki Giovanni. We will also distinguish between voice and point of view; point of view simply being the viewpoint of the story, whether it is first person, second person or third person. Students get the opportunity to tell their story while listening and learning from the voices of the great writers they will study.

After defining voice, we will read through various literary pieces from the last twenty years, attempting to stay as modern as possible. There will be a focus on the choreopoem *For Colored Girls Who Have Thought of Suicide/When the Rainbow is Enuf* by Ntozake Shange because it allows the students to examine various points of view through a single work. Also, students will examine the poetry of Julia Alvarez as well as excerpts from Sandra Cisneros' books *The House on Mango Street* and *Women Hollering Creek*. Each work in the unit will be analyzed looking specifically for the writer's "voice" and comparing that with a potential narrator's voice. This will allow the students to take a look at the differences between narrator and author, an often-difficult distinction. While reading, students will keep notes and journals looking for similarities and differences between the writers as well as with their own life experience. Prompts for students to respond to will range from comprehension questions ("where does the piece take place") to questions that ask students to connect ("when have you felt discriminated against?").

The unit will culminate with a final project that will have students taking pieces from their writing assignments and compiling a portfolio of their best work. This portfolio will have written elements as well as photographs, pictures and collages that represent the ideas in the students' writing. It is an opportunity for students to express their voice in words and pictures.

In addition to being able to recognize voice and how a writer develops his/her voice in his/her writing, I would like students to begin to explore self knowledge and identity. All the poems and/or short stories used in this curriculum unit will express a person's experience and it is my hope that students will recognize the value of their own experience in the whole scheme of the world.

Rationale

The objectives for this unit are:

1. Students will write before, during and after reading. The writing will have students journaling, answering questions and writing pieces similar to the ones they are reading. Also, they will be revising initial writing and understanding of what is being read;
2. Students will identify the writer and/or narrator's voice in literature written by female African Americans and Latinas;
3. Students will write pieces that express their own voice and their own experiences in life;

While teaching this curriculum unit, lessons include background information as well as reading and writing activities. The unit will be taught as part of the American Literature of junior year or as a supplemental unit for World Literature in the senior year. The literature by Latinas and African American women is different than the "usual" and traditional pieces found in the classroom literature and textbooks. I chose Julia Alvarez, Sandra Cisneros, Ntozake Shange and Nikki Giovanni because of their accessibility to students as well as the messages each writer sends. The four very different writers can be used as tools for teaching and identifying literature. Also by modeling (using the poetry or excerpts they read as examples or as a framework), students get the opportunity to develop their own voice.

It is important to understand the terms: Hispanic and Latino. Although one may think the terms are interchangeable, those in the Latino and/or Hispanic community might disagree. The term *Hispanic* is used by the US Census Bureau meaning all Spanish speaking persons in both hemispheres. Technically, the term Latino means of Latin American descent meaning that it cannot be used for countries like Spain that are not located in Latin America. While researching, I noticed that the term Hispanic is actually deemed quite offensive to Latinos. Writer Sandra Cisneros wrote, "The term Hispanic makes my skin crawl...it's very colononistic...a term imposed on us without asking what we wanted to call ourselves...the 'dominant culture' imposed this label on Latinos as a way of erasing their identify and their past" (Miranda). For the sake of this curriculum unit, we will use the term Latino/a.

The information below is simply an overview of Latina and African American literature. Both cultures are so rich with literary figures and literary tradition that it would be impossible to include all writers, styles and movements. This overview is simply a place to begin and to refer to when students have questions. Teachers can easily access detailed information on the Internet as well as in a variety of books and journals.

Latina and African American Literature

Latina Writers

Latino literature is filled with tradition, culture, prejudice and transition. Writers range from those born in the United States to immigrant parents to young girls coming to American from the Dominican Republic or Mexico. The language found the various Latin poems, essays and stories is intentional and purposeful; often it is intertwined with endearing, and not so endearing, Spanish phrases.

Much Latino literature is undoubtedly influenced by the United States. Puerto Rican literature has a great

history and place in writing. Initially, Puerto Rican literature was that of political exiles who came to America in the late 1800s. Although Puerto Ricans *should* have been viewed as part of the United States because of their political ties, writers (and everyday citizens for that matter) were seen as foreign nationals. These nationals wrote testimonials and impressions of their first years in the United States (mainly in New York City) in diaries and correspondences. So much of this immigrant literature was modest in size, told in the first person and filled with hopes for advancement and civic participation (Flores).

It was not until the 1960s that "Nuyorican" voices emerged and the Puerto Rican writing went against the grain of America. This boldness opened the door for writers to begin speaking their minds and telling what it was really like in America. Also, writers were working to dispel stereotypes of Latinos perpetuated in works like *West Side Story* and *La Vida*. The United States became a topic once again but it was truly a more realistic view of the hardships and prejudice Puerto Ricans faced (Flores).

Mexican or Chicano writers had a similar experience once in the United States. However, the Mexicans viewed themselves as having "been here" before the Anglo-Americans. In 1924, the US Border Patrol was created and effectively changed migration from Mexico into the Southwest. Early Chicano literature predates the Spanish/American war and eventually tells of the increasing presence of Anglos in the Southwest during the 18th and 19th centuries (Paredes).

An early literary form most identified with Southwestern Chicanos is the *corrido* - a narrative song that chronicles the life of a hero who overcomes all odds and prevails. Initially an oral tradition, the corrido gives a voice to the Mexican struggle for survival. Corridos are certainly a style of poetry students can model and relate to (Paredes, McKenna). In later years the corrido has come to take on a variety of forms. It can be either an epic, lyric or narrative poem or ballad that details much more than the life of a hero. Often the corrido will speak of struggle or hardships as well.

Female Chicano writers often write of the same struggles of men: trying to fit in and survive in the United States. The 1980s had a great influx of women who wrote of social struggle, isolation and freedom. Sandra Cisneros and Gloria Anzaldúa are two of the foremost Chicana writers. Although Chicano refers to writers of Mexican descent, the similar plights and struggles can be found in a lot of Latina literature. Specific cultural differences can be found within different communities but overall, writers highlight many of the same emotions (McKenna).

Students will undoubtedly find a connection between the Latino struggle and triumph and the trials and tribulations of their own lives. Often teenagers are looking to be heard by parents, teachers and other adults. This desire to be heard is found in much of the Latino literature. The poetry and literature emerging from the Latino canon speaks of truth and a literary and cultural freedom. Word choice, as Julia Alvarez notes, is deliberate because writers often had to learn the English language and experiment with meaning and strength. There was a pressure to *not* write in their native tongue that forced this very purposeful act (Paredes, McKenna).

Latino literature and African American literature share many similarities. Themes of struggle, freedom and identity are woven through so many literary pieces throughout history. Not unlike Chicanas and other Latinas, African American women fought to be heard in a society where they struggled for very basic rights and freedoms. The literature is also rich with tradition and values stemming from family and from their roots (whether those roots are from Africa or from specific areas of the United States).

African American Writers

Throughout history, African American literature has grown and the voices have grown stronger. Early African American writers were often slaves and abolitionists. But it is necessary to note that there is a great difference between storytelling and writing. Slaves often told stories but lack of education and resources led to theirs being an oral tradition; legacies of stories were passed on from generation to generation (Siasoco).

Phillis Wheatley was one of the first Black writers to make a name for herself. She was lucky enough to receive tutoring from her owners and master the English language. Wheatley's work was controversial not only because she was a woman but because she was also a bonded slave. Access to printing resources allowed her to become one of the first prominent female Black writers (Siasoco).

During the Harlem Renaissance, African American writers, musicians, actors and artists flourished. Zora Neale Hurston wrote *Their Eyes Were Watching God* in the 1930's and Dorothy West wrote *The Living is Easy*. Both novels were drastically different in content but served to tell the world about the lives of women during times of war, segregation and prejudice (Siasoco).

The Civil Rights Movement brought both men and women writers of color to the forefront. Activists became playwrights and represented Black life on stage. Lorraine Hansberry, writer of *A Raisin in the Sun* portrayed a poor Black family living in Chicago (Siasoco).

As time has moved on, African American women have certainly become part of the growing literary canon. Classic (and quite famous) writers such as Nobel Prize Winner Toni Morrison, Pulitzer Prize Winner Alice Walker and Maya Angelou can be studied side by side with modern writers, Ntozake Shange, Nikki Giovanni and Patricia Powell. Two important writers of the last twenty years are Nikki Giovanni and Ntozake Shange. Both women use their writing to give a voice to African American women and their plight both as females and as a minority (Siasoco).

Writers Who Made A Difference

Teaching voice involves choosing examples that truly speak to the students, especially those of color. The following information highlights four writers, two Latina and two female African American who not only write in a way that is appealing and relatable but who also have a voice for their particular community.

Why these four writers? In researching Latina writers and female African American writers, Julia Alvarez, Sandra Cisneros, Nikki Giovanni and Ntozake Shange appeared over and over. What stands out is the fact that each of these women writes about what she knows and does not feel that because of her gender that she should keep quiet about certain topics. Sandra Cisneros writes about growing up, sexual discovery and rape. Shange writes about abuse and lose of virginity. Alvarez and Giovanni both look at issues of family, struggle and freedom. These are all themes that teenagers face as they are growing up and discovering what they believe and what they want for their lives. There is no doubt that the students will relate to the writers style and/or messages and will be able to recognize the voice of the narrator.

Julia Alvarez

"I have a voice and I'm saying things"

- Julia Alvarez

Novelist, poet and essayist Julia Alvarez speaks to women of color, to women writers and to the world. Author of well known novels, *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* and *In the Time of Butterflies*, she is a voice for the Latina community. Born in New York City at three months old, her parents returned to their roots in the Dominican Republic until Julia was ten years old. In the Dominican Republic, she actually lived a very "American lifestyle". Alvarez wrote, "I had gone to an American school and spent most of the day speaking and reading English. At night, my prayers were full of blond hair, blue eyes and snow..." ("Julia Alvarez"). Her family was obsessed with American culture and had strong ties to the United States; her grandfather was an ambassador to the United Nations while her uncles were Ivy League educated. Ironically, their connection the United States would be what would ultimately save their lives.

Alvarez's father was involved with insurgents looking to overthrow Rafael Trujillo during the 1950s and 1960s. Initially, the Dominican government would not touch a family with such strong ties to the United States, but in 1960, the police began surveillance on the Alvarez compound and Julia's father knew he needed to leave the country or his life would be in danger. Julia and her family returned to New York City in the 1960.

Alvarez felt that returning to New York City would be a homecoming; she was sadly very wrong. Entering an American school having spoken English laced with Spanish did not prepare her at all. Alvarez wrote, "I did pick up enough English to know the natives were not very welcoming. Spic! My classmates yelled at me. Mami insisted the kids were yelling, Speak! And then she wonders where my storytelling genes come from" (Alvarez). Her experience led her to writing and reading. Eventually, Alvarez went on to earn bachelor and graduate degrees and ultimately, becoming a teacher. Learning about the obstacles Alvarez faced and how she is not afraid to speak out about them can show students the value of words and the value of rising above potential oppression.

When reading Alvarez's work as well as countless interviews, it is clear she is a natural storyteller comfortable speaking of her truth and experience. As with all writers, she is often asked what led her to writing. Alvarez notes that coming to the United States and learning a new language encouraged her natural ability. She notes that not (truly) understanding the language forced her to be aware and deliberate with every word. Alvarez said, "I also discovered the welcoming world of imagination and books" (Alvarez). Latino culture, as observed by Alvarez, was often one of oral tradition and coming to the United States allied reading and writing with storytelling.

Learning a new language also forces writers to look at word choice. The analysis of words makes a person pay attention to "why people are saying things one way as opposed to another"⁷ Non native speakers have to really listen and become acutely aware of the power words have. This deliberate act places so much more power and emphasis on words and forces a writers' voice to become more significant (Garner).

Philosophically, Alvarez believes her writing speaks for women, especially Latina women. She began writing seriously during college and realized as "Afro-Americans" were emerging they were struggling to become part of the literary canon. Non-white, non-mainstream writers faced a great challenge, yet Alvarez kept writing because that is what was in her to do ("Julia Alvarez").

Sandra Cisneros

I think that as human beings many people touch us, especially people we love the most and we can't help but do character sketches when we go to our art.

- Sandra Cisneros

Poverty. Suppression. Identity. Gender. All issues addressed in Sandra Cisneros's poetry, essays and short stories. Cisneros was born in 1954 and is the author of *The House on Mango Street*, *Women Hollering Creek* and a myriad of poetry books. As a Chicano-American writer, she creates characters that are distinctly Latino and separated from mainstream America. Cisneros uses great sensory imagery and deliberate dialogue. In both of her short story books, which are essentially collections of vignettes, the female narrators allow the reader to see adolescence through the eyes of a young Latina growing up in the United States. *The House on Mango Street*'s narrator, Esperanza, tells us of family life, Latin tradition, familial obligation and feeling isolated (Amaya-Roldan).

Cisneros's literary voice is that of her people. She creates real people from her own experience. Her voice also stemmed from an "imbalance" in her life; she realized as a Chicano she was different and unique (Amaya-Roldan). In turn, she created a voice for her race, her gender and her class. Also, Cisneros became a voice for the struggle of women emerging from very patriarchal communities who would rather see women not speak of real life and possibly, cultural secrets (Amaya-Roldan).

Cisneros finds inspiration for her literary voice in a variety of places. She is influenced by religion, family and her culture. She seeks to immerse herself in her characters and her dialogue (Sagel). Conveying the way an author finds inspiration can help students find different ways to jump start their own writing and creativity.

The House on Mango Street is a collection of vignettes written from the perspective of young Esperanza growing up in New York City. The collection introduces the reader to a variety of characters, such as the three aunts who give Esperanza sage advice helping her through rough times. There is also her friend Sally who teaches her that growing up is not always easy in the selection, *The Monkey Garden*. The novel can be used in part or as a whole to introduce students to Latina literature and to help them model their own writing.

Ntozake Shange

"I am gonna write poems til I die and when I have gotten otta this body, I am gonna hang round in the wind and knock over everybody who got their feet on the ground."

- Ntozake Shange

Born Paulette Williams in 1948, Ntozake Shange is a major writer in the African American community. Shange is the oldest of four and grew up in middle class St. Louis. Despite her middle class status, she endured racism and prejudice as a part of the desegregation forced by the *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision.

Her parents were both educators and Shange came into contact with prominent writers, leaders and artists of the 1950s and 1960s. In fact, W.E.B. Du Bois was often a family visitor as Shange was growing up. Although she had many financial and social advantages, Shange suffered a lonely and silent angst. By eighteen years old, she had attempted suicide a number of times and often felt bitter and alienated (Bridges).

In 1971, Shange officially changed her name to the African name: Ntozake (which means "she who comes with her own things") Shange ("who walks like a lion). The name change was a symbolic transformation from deep resentment and isolation to a discovery of inner strength and redirection of life. Before even reading her work, women can sense her need to empower herself and redirect her passion and energy.

For Colored Girls Who Have Thought of Suicide/When the Rainbow is Enuf is Shange's most notable work. Her choreopoem is a "drama of self-celebration because all-too-human black women are presented who are preoccupied with living and surviving" (Bridges). A choreopoem can be categorized as a mixture of spoken word, dance, music and prose. The choreopoem has seven different women dressed in seven distinct colors emphasizing their suffering at the hands of black men and their ability to survive and overcome these hardships. The poetry is moving but portrays black men in a very negative light. They are the "beasts" that lie, seduce, beat, rape and abandon. Although not the experience of every woman, it is a view into the lives of women who are imprisoned and abused (Bridges).

Nikki Giovanni

"Talk to me, Poem...I'm all alone...Nobody understands what/I'm saying"

- from *Shoulders are for Emergencies Only*

Leader and writer Nikki Giovanni has been a revolutionary poet and a voice for over 20 years. Giovanni emerged in the 1960s, becoming a "Black Rights" poet with her personal and political poetry. She sought to take her own personal experiences and make them universal and principal to all people. Such a writer can easily create literature that readers can relate to and find meaning in.

Giovanni's political poetry showed awareness towards the mentality of "an oppressed race, the anger and the desire to break free from oppression at all costs" (Wahlburg). Giovanni also sought to expose truth, like so many other writers. Her truth comes from her daily experience and what she viewed as the process of overcoming oppression. She often focused on her audience and what she could convey to them. She spoke of new beginnings and overcoming bitterness in an effort to come out on top.

Nikki Giovanni's poetry is a "case of the heart" in which truth finds its way onto the page. Giovanni strongly feels that her Southern and Appalachian voice comes through because of her sense of remembrance and independence unique to her location. She says "I'm just a poet looking at the world" and she is expressing her views to the reader (Wahlburg).

Giovanni is undoubtedly remembered as a revolutionary poet of the civil rights movement. She fought against white oppression with bold language and a defiant stand. Her first book of poetry was *Black Feeling, Black Talk* (1968); followed shortly after by *Black Judgment* and *Re:Creation*. "Voices from the Gap" identifies Giovanni's motives on her first book as clearly conveying the "importance of ... awareness about the rights of African Americans" (Wahlburg).

Nikki Giovanni has clearly created a voice for herself in the literary *and* political worlds. She can be used in the classroom to show students how to not only identify the voice of revolution but also to show the effects of a strong and lasting career in literature. She is also an author who writes about her own truth - the truth she observes and the truth she lives as an activist, a writer and simply, as a human being (A Poetic Equation: Conversations Between Nikki Giovanni and Margaret Walker). Emphasizing truthful writing (and by truthful, we mean writing about what one knows and lives each day as opposed to strictly fictional writing) can help novice writers become comfortable with their own ideas and observations.

Giovanni began writing decades ago and still remains current today. Modern readers can look to her for observations of life, in poems such as "the train to Knoxville". They can also look to her for commentaries on

modern life and modern figures in poems such as "Sanctuary: For Harry Potter the movie". Her writing lends itself to a variety of uses in the classroom. Her poems have an honest, deliberate tone that speaks to readers' integrity, values and genuine humanity. Her writing style is free and she often writes in poem form as well as in prose form. Giovanni's poems allow for classes to discuss the style as well as the content making them perfect to use in a High School Language Arts class (Wahlburg).

Strategies

The curriculum unit lends itself to various methods of teaching; whether it be reading and answering questions, having classroom discussions or in depth text analysis. My teaching strategies would be a combination of reading, journaling, group work, whole class discussion and finally, producing a collection of writing in a portfolio. Each student would be responsible for taking part in class discussion of the various readings as well as keeping notes and writing paragraphs, poems, or longer responses to different prompts.

For me, text analysis is an amalgamation of different writing techniques, especially the method of text rendering promoted by the Connecticut Writing Project. Text analysis will have students reading and responding in a journal. Students will also write questions for the authors as well as for each other. For example, students may ask "why" a character made a certain choice or may begin a journal with "I wonder..." and make predictions about what characters may do. Another key element is that students will look at the voice of the writer (and/or narrator) and what techniques the author has used to get that voice and message across.

Journaling is something we did not do a lot of when I was in high school. Quite often, we read our selected pieces for homework, answered questions and had a class discussion. Writing was something separate; saved for tests or essays. In recent years, journaling has gained a greater following and respect for several reasons; students become more invested in the reading because they are responsible for reacting to the words and because students can look back and see their initial and (possibly) limited view of what was read. It is certain that the students' true voice is in the pages and lines of their journals. A journal is a place for students to write a response or to record questions and concerns. It is also a place free of grammar, spelling and mechanical corrections; a place where the true thought process comes out. As a teacher, I see the journal as a place where my students can be real and eventually, use the journal as a resource for future writing. The practice of using journals as a resource has proven to be very successful in previous activities in my classes.

I use a variety of methods to engage students. Stories or poems read will be done in class at times allowing students to ask questions as we read. We would also look at the most important words and phrases within a work. This will help us discuss why word choice is so important. Also, there would be a great deal of modeling. I would model different writing styles for my students as well as having them model the readings. For example, students will read a selection entitled "My Name" from *The House on Mango Street* and then will write their own version of "My Name" addressing their own name and its meaning.

Activities will also address the different learning styles and intelligences in the classroom. Hands-on activities (such as making a collage or creating a poster) will appeal to the visual-spatial learner. When we look at language, we will look for patterns and rhythm which will appeal to the musical learner. Students will have opportunities to build intrapersonal as well as interpersonal skills. The intrapersonal learner will have an

opportunity to read and reflect but will build interpersonal skills while working with peers in a group. This group work will appeal to the interpersonal intelligence but reflection and journaling will work with their intrapersonal intelligence.

Assessment during the course of these lessons will be ongoing. The final product (a portfolio of all their work) will include creative elements appealing to those who excel in art, photography, etc. and may not be strong writers. Also, class discussion will play a role in daily assessments for students who are more verbal. Periodically checking journals and direct questioning will serve as a daily assessment to see if students are on task and are making connections with the literature.

How will I assess the unit's success? Success is more than just whether or not the students were on task at all times or if they all read the nightly assignments. That is certainly measurable success in that it measures whether or not the students were clear about assignments and tasks. The other side of this unit being successful is what the students write. Did he/she express an idea in his/her own words speaking from his/her own experience? Were the pieces selected helpful in developing students' voice? These questions will be answered daily during discussion and when the final project is handed in.

Classroom Activities

The following lesson plans are designed to work in an 82 minute block. However, the teacher can add or subtract elements to suit his/her needs on any particular day.

Lesson One: What is voice?

Introduction to Lesson: Direct instruction – explain the literary definition of **voice** (It can be defined as the rhythm and sound of an author's words. This rhythm and sound comes from the word choice and fluency of those chosen words. Voice is essential in the tone and mood an author is looking to establish – *from Unit Introduction*).

Group Work: Distribute the poem "In Praise of a Teacher" by Nikki Giovanni – students are to read the poem together. Groups will be given a reading guide that will ask them to choose three important words as well as deciding the author's mood and tone in the piece.

Whole Class Discussion: As a class, we will discuss the groups' findings. This will allow students to look at the technical aspects of Giovanni's voice and apply the definition of voice previously discussed in class.

Lesson Two: What's in a Name?

Introduction to Lesson: Have students journal about their own name. What does it mean or why did their parents choose it? Students can also journal about how they feel about their name and if they would like to change it.

Reading : Once students have done their journaling, distribute the chapter entitled "My Name" from *The*

House on Mango Street by Sandra Cisneros and read aloud with the class.

Discussion of reading : How does Esperanza feel about her name? What does she associate it with? Do her ethnicity and her location (NYC) play any part in how she feels about her name?

Writing Activity : Students will write a piece (modeled after "My Name") about their own name - for homework, students are to ask parents/guardians about how they were named. Also, students can research the meaning of his/her name and include that in the piece.

Lesson Three: One Significant Day

Pre-Reading: Journal Prompt - Choose one important day in your life and write down five reasons that day was important and one thing that you learned on that day.

Pair Share - Take one minute to tell a partner what the day was and why.

Read: "Audition" by Julia Alvarez. Students will first read aloud each reading one line of the poem each. After that initial reading, students will write down their impressions and their understanding. Some students will share. We will read one more time following the rules of punctuation - hopefully making more meaning of the poem - students will journal once again

Class Discussion: Discuss the literal meaning of the poem and then discuss technique while analyzing what the author is trying to tell us. How did this important day shape the narrators' identify?

Extension/Homework : Students will write about their important day using Alvarez as a model with dialogue and reflection as opposed to just listing or telling. It is optional for students to write a poem or write a vignette

Lesson Four: "Ten Things I Learned..." (This can take two class periods)

Pre-Reading: In journal, list ten things you have learned this year...academic and non-academic.

Group Work: Put students in small groups. Give each group markers and a piece of poster paper to create a list of "Twenty Things I've Learned during my Junior Year" - they can include pictures (drawn) and should be creative and colorful. When groups are done, they can share with class and teacher can hang them up.

Reading : Read "One Holy Night" by Sandra Cisneros from *Women Hollering Creek* aloud as a class

Pair Discussion - With that a partner, discussion questions about the reading - what happens on that day? What is a result of that occurrence? How does Cisneros express what is happening in figurative language as opposed to telling it outright? What does the narrator learn? What is she trying to tell the reader?

Group Discussion of Reading - using the partners responses, discuss the literal meaning of the short passage and then discuss Cisneros' technique and her way of teaching a lesson.

Homework: Choose one lesson from your list of ten (or your groups) and write one page about how you learned that lesson.

Lesson Five: What Color Do You See? (This may take three or four class periods depending on how long it will take for students to read the choreopoem).

Part One: Before Reading the Poem

Journal: If you had to choose a color to be identified with, what would it be and why?

Post-Journal: Ask students for color(s) they identify with and words they associate with those colors (put responses on the board). When done, circle the seven colors from *For Colored Girls Who Have Thought of Suicide*. Note: In the poem, the women are titled "Women in Red, Women in Orange, etc." Assign students one of the seven colors (brown, yellow, purple, red, green, blue, orange) to trace and follow throughout the reading of the choreopoem.

Tracing a Color: Explain that students will keep notes on what their character's story is throughout the reading of the poem. Notes should include what happens to her in her life, why that color would be associated with her and what she says to the other characters.

*The poem will probably be read over the course of two evenings – after reading the first ½ the class will discuss the events and the symbolism found in the poem – including but not limited to the colors.

Part Two:

After reading the entire poem, students will meet with the other students who were tracing the same woman throughout the poem. In groups, they will create a character sketch of that particular woman, paying close attention to what they feel the message was and how effectively they felt the author conveyed that message (see *Character Sketch* below). Also, students will write a piece in which they choose a color for themselves and write a one-page prose piece or poem (see *Color Me* below).

Character Sketch for *For Colored Girls Who Have Thought of Suicide...*

Task: You and your group are going to create a character sketch based on your reading. The character sketch must contain the following elements:

1. Description of the Woman – Her color, her background, etc.
2. Symbolism of the Color and how it relates to her story
3. How does her story relate to that of the other women – Was hers easier to understand? Was hers easier to relate to?
4. Create a collage or a visual for your character and what she has to say. You should not limit yourself to simply using the color she represents.

Materials: Chart Paper, markers, glue, magazines

Color Me Writing Assignment: Students are to write a one page piece of poetry or prose in which they select a color for themselves. They will title their piece *Man/Woman in _____* (insert chosen color) and then write about why they chose that color. The writing can be free verse.

Lesson Six: Collage of Pictures from Poetry

Activity: Students will be put into cooperative groups and given one poem by Nikki Giovanni. The groups will be given one of the following: "Balances", "Kidnap Poem", "Choices", "BLK History Month" or "The Girls in the Circle"

Group Work Activity: In groups students will find the following in their poem:

5 Summary (what is the poem literally saying)

6 Who is the speaker?

7 What is the author's purpose?

8 What literary devices does the author use to convey the tone and the voice in the poem?

9 Create a visual for the poem

Students will use poster paper to create their visual and will present their findings to the class.

Lesson Seven: Corrido, Corrido

Journal: Who do you consider a hero? Why?

Class Discussion: As a class, we will discuss what constitutes a hero. I will list all the ideas on the board and ask students to have me circle the most important idea. We will discuss that often times a hero goes through a struggle or overcomes great obstacles.

Direct Instruction: Explain what a corrido is. A corrido is a narrative song that chronicles the life of a hero who overcomes all odds and prevails.

Reading: We will read a corrido aloud in class. While reading, students are to circle or underline elements of a hero that they see within the poem.

Writing Activity: Either alone or in pairs, students will create their own corrido about a hero. We will emphasize word choice and tone.

Note: Teacher will have to locate an appropriate corrido and may have to find someone to translate as many resources are written in Spanish.

Optional/Alternate Lesson :

Before the entire unit begins, there can be presentations on the different writers. Depending on the class dynamics, the presentations can be made by the teacher or by the students. PowerPoint or overheads can be made easily using the background information and accessing different information from the Internet. This will give students a sense of continuity throughout the unit.

Culminating Activity - "Who I am Beyond What People See" Portfolio

Task : Students are going to compile your reflections, journaling and writing based on the writing, reading and discussion we have done over the past few weeks. Each piece we have read should be used as a basis and used as a model to help you write.

Requirements : Each piece must be one typed page (double spaced – 12 point font); there must be a cover page that is creatively decorated as well as an "About the Author" page; pictures or graphics can be on your pages but should not take away from the one page length

Topics (these are examples of potential topics students can write about based on the reading and writing – teacher should decide and list exactly what topics students should include): An important day, "My Name", who I am beyond what people see, an important lesson that I learned, the color the best represents me, etc.

Resources

For Teachers

Books:

Samuel Cohen. *50 Essays: A Portable Anthology* (Boston, MA: Bedford/St.Martin's, 2004): This collection of essays contains a number of essays written by female African American and Latina women. There is the famous "Ain't I a Woman?" from Sojourner Truth as well as Alice Walker's "In Search of our Mother's Gardens". This collection gives teachers a place to read and reflect on women's voices throughout history and also provides some background information to relay to the students.

Stephen O'Connor. *Will My Name Be Shouted Out?*. This book is Stephen O'Connor's story of teaching literature and writing in the New York Public School system. He includes his own observations as well as excerpts from his students' writings. The book is poignant and informative for anyone teaching in an urban environment.

V.P. Franklin. *Living Our Stories: Telling Our Truths*. (New York, NY: Scribner, 1995). Author V.P. Franklin analyzes the lives of twelve major African American writers (such as Richard Wright, Zora Neale Hurston and Gwendolyn Brooks). The authors' lives and work as well as their contribution to the African American community are analyzed. The book is a great resource for those interested in presenting information to students about the contributions of the writers.

Media:

DVD: *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow Is Enuf* (Broadway Theatre Archive) (1982) – This video is from the Broadway Theater Archives and is directed by Oz Scott. The choreopoem itself debuted in 1978 and this production was done several years later. The video will certainly give some meaning to Shange's words and help more visual students understand the concepts.

Internet:

Voices from the Gap (<http://voices.cla.umn.edu/VG/index.html>): This website is dedicated to women artists and writers of color. There is a wealth of information about various writers with an entire section of interviews done with many of the writers featured in this unit.

Outta Ray's Head Lesson Plans (<http://home.cogeco.ca/~rayser3/litera1.htm>): This website has a variety of resources and writing ideas to use within this unit. There are a series of memoir and vignette writing sections that teachers can use to enhance any section of this unit.

African American Women's History ([http://www.womenshistory.](http://www.womenshistory.about.com/od/africanamerican/)

[about.com/od/africanamerican/](http://www.womenshistory.about.com/od/africanamerican/)) : This website has information about African American women and African American writers. Another place to find background information. Teachers can also use the search option and find information about Latinas and other women of color.

Reading List for Students

For Classroom Activities:

Julia Alvarez "Audition" (poem): The poem is about a young girl and her mother going into a poor town looking (or auditioning) a new housekeeper for their home. The young girl imagines how she will win over each new housekeeper and in the end her mother picks the one girl in town who is not overly eager to become a housekeeper.

Sandra Cisneros. "My Name". *The House on Mango Street*: Esperanza explains to the reader that her name translates as "hope" but she also associates her name with all the things in her life: her parents, her sister and even, her great grandmother. She compares her name metaphorically to a number of things (the number nine, the records her father plays). This is a perfect piece for students to read and use a model when writing about their own names.

Sandra Cisneros. "One Holy Night" *Women Hollering Creek*: The short story starts with a quotation about truth and how someone has such power over you if they know the truth about you and what you've done. The story details the young narrator and her relationship with a man named Baby Boy. They have a secret relationship resulting in the narrator becoming pregnant and realizing that Baby Boy was too old and too dishonest to be her boyfriend or husband. The story also shows her family's reaction to her pregnancy. It is a story that shows familial relationships, loss of innocence and truth.

Nikki Giovanni. "In Praise of Teacher". *Quilting the Black Eyed Pea* (New York: Harper Collins, 2002): This poem is just as the title suggests. It is a poem written in prose form that praises a teacher from the speaker's life. Miss Delaney is a teacher that introduced the narrator to a variety of stories and exposed her to writings such as *Native Son* and to the writers Langston Hughes, Gwendolyn Brooks and Richard Wright.

Ntozake Shange. *For Colored Girls Who Have Thought of Suicide/When the Rainbow is Enuf* : The choreopoem has seven different women dressed in seven distinct colors emphasizing their suffering at the hands of black men and their ability to survive and overcome these hardships. The poem can be used in its entirety as in the lesson plans but teachers can also use excerpts throughout the unit.

For Outside Reading:

Julia Alvarez *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* (Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books, 1991). – This novel is the story of four Dominican sisters and their lives coming to New York City from the Dominican Republic. Each chapter is about a specific sister and interestingly, the novel starts in the present and works its way back to the girls living in the Dominican Republic.

Sandra Cisneros. *The House on Mango Street* (Place: Vintage Books, 1991) -- *The House on Mango Street* is a series of vignettes told by Esperanza, the book's young Mexican narrator growing up in Chicago. The different vignettes introduce the reader to a variety of colorful characters and places. The forty four chapters take us through Esperanza's journey of growing up. Any of these chapters could be used to read and model.

Sandra Cisneros. *Women Hollering Creek* – Much like *The House on Mango Street*, this is also a series of vignettes. The stories take place on the Texas/Mexican border and are also a glimpse into growing up as a Chicana and also embracing family and tradition.

Nikki Giovanni. *Quilting the Blacked Eyed Pea* (New York: Harper Collins, 2002): Just one of many of Giovanni's collections of poetry. This collection features "poems and not quite poems" as Giovanni herself puts on the cover. She addresses 9/11 and post 9/11 years as well as authors James Baldwin and Gwendolyn Brooks.

Materials for Classroom Activities:

Copies of *My Name* from *The House on Mango Street*

Copies of *One Holy Night* from *Women Hollering Creek*

Chart paper and markers for "Ten Things I Learned"

Copies of "In Praise of Teacher" by Nikki Giovanni and "Audition" by Julia Alvarez

Class Set of the choreopoem (in book form) of *For Colored Girls Who Have Thought of Suicide*

Copies of the following poems: "Balances", "Kidnap Poem", "Choices", "BLK History Month" and "The Girls in the Circle" by Nikki Giovanni

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Appendix

This curriculum unit aligns with the following standards.

National and Local Standards

This curriculum unit addresses the following language arts standards as set forth by the National Council for Teachers of English:

- Students read a wide range of print and non-print texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment.
- Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They

draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics).

- Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.
- Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions, media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and non-print texts.
- Students develop an understanding of and respect for diversity in language use, patterns, and dialects across cultures, ethnic groups, geographic regions, and social roles.
- Students whose first language is not English make use of their first language to develop competency in the English language arts and to develop understanding of content across the curriculum.

The curriculum unit addresses the following Language Arts Standards from Grades 9 -12 for the City of New Haven:

Content Standard 1.0: Reading:

- Students will demonstrate strategic reading skills before, during and after reading.
- Students will move beyond the text - reflect, make judgments about its quality and meaning.
- Students will construct meaning through analyzing, elaborating, and responding critically.

Content Standard 2.0: Writing

- Students will demonstrate strategic writing skills, before, during and after writing.
- Students will participate in a wide variety of writing experiences.
- Students will establish a purpose for writing.
- Students will determine and plan for a specific audience.
- Students will establish tone, theme, point of view, and type of writing.

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