



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute  
2007 Volume I: American Voices: Listening to Fiction, Poetry, and Prose

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## **Discovering the Voice Within: Encouraging Students to See Themselves as Writers**

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Oh, Great Spirit, whose voice I hear in the winds and whose breath gives life to all the world, hear me. I am small and weak. I need your strength and wisdom.

-American Indian, Lakota, Chief Yellow Lark – 1887

Adolescence is all about discovering ones voice and identity. By identity, I mean the age old question, "Who am I?". Many of my students are experimenting with who they are and what they want from their lives. They are trying to make sense of the world by questioning and arguing with things they see, hear and experience. They are rebelling and testing the boundaries in order to see where they fit in. Students need activities that encourage them to become more confident about who they are as individuals. The quote above demonstrates the coming of age search for identity and strength. My students have a voice within waiting to emerge, they are searching for the appropriate venue to release this voice. The voice needs guidance and encouragement, but eventually it will evolve from a small, weak voice to a strong and wise voice. It is the responsibility of educators to make sure that students are given the appropriate guidance to allow them to grow and develop into writers. I intend to incorporate activities into this unit that allow students to practice exploring and strengthening their voice through writing. Students learn to write by writing regularly. "We tend to see writing as if it was oppositional to speaking, but voice is in fact a bridge to writing-writing and speaking are collaborative" (Hammer). As students practice writing they become more confident and begin to see themselves as writers. They realize that they have a voice and that their ideas and opinions are valid.

Voice is probably one of the most difficult concepts that I teach my students because it is so complicated. Many questions arise when one thinks about the topic of voice: what is voice literally, who are the voices in the room, and who has the right to have a voice? In the classroom, voice is usually identified with power. The person in power is the one who has the authority to speak and those who don't have power must listen. Voice is therefore created between speaker and audience. Who has the opportunity to speak and who must remain silent? Traditionally, the teacher is the figure with the authority to speak; however, in a student-centered classroom students are given the power to have a voice and speak when they choose. Voice equals authority; that is opinions that have strength and are a persuasive force. A student-centered classroom is organized in a circle with the teacher a participant in the circle as opposed to stationed at the front of the room. Students call on each other when they want to share their thoughts instead of the teacher having the power to choose who speaks and who doesn't.

Voice is something produced by the body. Voices are distinctive and imitable. We identify and recognize people by their voices even when sick or we haven't spoken to the person in a long time. (Elbow) Voice is comprised of both sound and style; that is pitch, tone as well as the manner in which the person speaks. Although voice is authentic, we have multiple voices in our repertoire. "Our voice is made up of many voices. Finding a voice is learning about the many voices that we have" (Hammer). One speaks differently dependent upon audience and purpose. For example, a person might speak differently to their boss then to their friend. The quality of their voice may not change dramatically, however the style and tone may change. Voice changes to reflect on emotions as well. A person who is nervous may quiver, stammer or stutter in uncomfortable situations just as a person who is angry will reflect this emotion in their tone. At the same time, a person has a public voice that they share when they speak in addition to a private voice inside their head that houses their inner thoughts within the mind.

I am a tenth grade English teacher at Wilbur Cross High School in New Haven, Connecticut. Wilbur Cross High School is the largest high school in the city with a population of approximately 1600 students. Wilbur Cross is not a magnet school, so only New Haven residents are allowed to attend. It is one of the two non-magnet schools in the district. This unit is written for sophomore high school students, both mainstream and sheltered content.

Sheltered content is a new program initiated this year in the district. This program replaces the bi-lingual education program that traditionally accommodated non-native speaking students. The reason that this program was initiated was because non-native speaking students were scoring drastically lower on standardized tests than mainstream students. The deficiency was attributed to the fact that students were not getting enough content area knowledge in their bi-lingual classes. As a result, students are no longer taught in their native language, but instructed only in English by two teachers, one content area teacher and one English as a Second Language teacher in a co-teaching model. The students placed in these classes are from various countries, generally Spanish speaking comprising of South America, Central America, Puerto Rico as well as Asian countries. The students contribute to the diversity of our school community and carry their history, culture and values into the classroom. These aspects can be used in various lessons and discussions over many content areas. Sheltered content students struggle not only with the content area but acquiring language at the same time. One of the objectives in this unit is to incorporate modifications for English Language Learners in the English classroom. Ideally, I would like the students to be able to engage in the same activities as the mainstream students with the help of scaffolding, graphic organizers, modeling and additional vocabulary.

As an English teacher, I have observed that students struggle the most with writing. Many of my students are able to verbalize their thoughts. They can effortlessly debate and explain themselves in detail, but formulating their ideas into clear, concise and organized writing is often intimidating and frustrating for these same students. Thinking back to when I was in high school I remember having similar problems. Writing definitely wasn't my strength. I coasted through my high school English classes writing for the teacher. I would figure out what the teachers wanted me to write about and how to write about it, then I would write exactly what I thought they wanted. I wrote for the grade and not for myself. Everything I produced was designed to please others. When I entered college as an English major I discovered that I was expected to write my thoughts instead of the teachers'. It was at this time that I began experimenting with my authentic voice. I notice that many of my students share these same qualities when approaching the subject of writing. A lot of times students ask me if what they wrote is right or good. Despite the fact that I emphasize that there is no right or wrong answer, the students are programmed to vie for my approval or exhibit learned helplessness. Students often struggle with independent thinking and activities that encourage them to authentically think. It is much

easier to have someone give you the answer than have to struggle through the process of figuring it out on your own. When I tell them to write what they think they look at me with puzzled stares. "But how do I know what to think?" is the response that I receive from many of my students. They want to know what I think instead of thinking for themselves. My students are also not used to writing frequently. They are used to worksheets and assignments that require lower-level thinking. My students are used to responding to a teacher-chosen topic and text.

My objectives for this unit are to encourage students to become authentic thinkers and express their unique thinking through various creative writing projects. I want to emphasize that this unit is a *creative* writing unit because so often teachers organize their lessons around grammar and vocabulary. I want to concentrate on the creative aspect of writing because tenth graders are so overloaded with CAPT preparation during the first half of the year they seldom get the opportunity and the freedom to step outside of the box and the structure that the exam demands. Although the unit does not emphasize CAPT drills and prompts, it does teach CAPT related skills through critical thinking, questioning and reactions. For example, in the memoir lesson students visualize an event to write about. The skill of visualization is number four on the CAPT test but it is taught authentically without drills. Also, the I wonder why questions and theorizing are question one in the CAPT exam. Students will begin to view themselves as writers by writing often. They will frequently practice writing by exploring various genres in particular: journaling, poetry, memoir and documentary/personal history/story telling. Journaling refers to students writing regularly in their personal notebooks in class. Journaling takes place from anywhere between 10-15 minutes in the beginning of class. Students write their responses, questions, notes and reactions within their journal. Students will learn by familiarizing themselves and modeling with different genres of writing. Modeling is a technique used to show students samples of work in order to familiarize them with the process and give them a "model" to use when writing their personal work. Modeling gives the students a chance to examine exemplars. Modeling also is used in the sheltered content classroom in which the teacher demonstrates what something looks like and sounds like. Students will be exposed to both professional authors as well as student authors. English Language Learners will build necessary vocabulary to engage in the lessons, strengthen writing skills and reading comprehension.

## **Memoir**

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Memoir is one of the genres that students will explore. The memoir is a genre in which students can explore their problems, fears and concerns with their lives and the world around them. Many adolescents have fears and problems in their daily lives that they must cope with. They need an outlet that allows them to voice their concerns without judgment or consequences. They can write about what they want to as opposed to having a specific topic or subject that the teacher has chosen. In order to create a student-centered classroom, it is important to as often as possible give students choice in what they read and write about. Student choice gives them an investment in their education. Student choice also empowers students which is important for many students who feel helpless in their lives. They will most likely be engaged in what they are doing if they have chosen the topic. Students will be given time in class to think, write and share their writing and receive feedback to the text we work with.

Memoir allows the reader to share in an event in the life of the writer at a memorable moment. It is different from the autobiography because it doesn't retell the writer's entire life, but merely a glimpse. "Memoir isn't the summary of a life; it's a window into a life, very much like a photograph in its selective composition."

(Zinsser 136). Photographs might assist with this lesson by demonstrating observation and voice through photos. Students must become familiar with the format of the memoir by experiencing through an example model. This model will have many details and sensory language which is necessary for an effective memoir. For many of the students that I teach, they are second language learners. These students can use the memoir to discuss cultural differences between America and their country of origin. Students might begin this process by comparing and contrasting their native country to the United States. After, they can brainstorm one of the issues or topics that they provided in the graphic organizer to begin drafting a story. English Language Learners can utilize this medium to discuss frustrations, fears and obstacles in the new culture.

To incorporate multiple intelligences I would like the students to create a photograph documentary. A photo documentary is a creative twist to the memoir project. Although the unit emphasizes finding voice through writing students can certainly express their voice through photographs. To preface this lesson, I will bring in various pictures for the students to analyze. Students will share their thoughts and reactions to the pictures through in class journaling. Another pre-activity to this lesson demonstrates multiple interpretations to a photograph. Each student will get a piece of a photograph. Prior to this lesson, I will take five or six photographs and cut them into four to five pieces. Each student will tape their photograph to a sheet of construction paper. They can tape the photograph wherever they choose; that is, in the center, the bottom corner, the top, etc. Where they choose to tape the photograph alters the picture according to their own perspective. Someone else might choose to position the photograph in a different place and hence their interpretation of that same picture would change. After, students are asked to complete the missing pieces of the picture. I will ask the students how they imagine the rest of the picture to look with only one piece in front of them. Students will finish the background to complete the picture. After, students will share their pictures and I will show them what the original pictures looks like. A discussion will follow in which I debrief the activity and get feedback from the students about various interpretations. This discussion will segway into how even when you read literature one person might have an alternative interpretation than another to the same text. For the photo documentary students will each receive a disposable camera to take home with them. Over the course of a few days, I will ask the students to introduce me to their family, neighborhood, friends, community and city by snapping photos of their choice of the world around them. The photographs will tell a story using a visual representation. The photo documentary will allow the viewer to see the world through the eyes of the student or the world in which the photographer wants to share with the audience. This project will allow students to formulate interpretations of their own world and allow the audience to generate interpretations about the world from the photographs presented. Visual images are powerful illustrations that written documentaries could possibly ignore. Also, this project will allow the class to begin discussion of visualization and just like we can see what the artist is experiencing through photos we can also visualize in a text. During this session, we might continue to discuss how the writer paints a picture in the head of the reader to visualize the characters, setting, actions, etc. Also, when students are writing they need to be conscience of painting a picture for their readers. A model of a text that is a good example of visualization would be effective, some text that demonstrates the five senses.

Poetry is a genre that is good for discussing voice. I chose to use African American poets to explore the different voices: Nikki Giovanni's, "All Eyez on U", Langston Hughes', "Theme from English B" and Maya Angelou's, "Alone". In All Eyez on U, Giovanni discusses the death of rap icon, Tupac Shakur. This poem is easily comprehensible for many of students who listen to hip-hop and rap music. He is a familiar figure and students can connect with a lot of the issues in his lyrics. In this particular poem, Giovanni questions the untimely death of a man that she compares to other famous black figures such as Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr. and Emmett Till who were killed through violence.

But he will not go away

As Malcolm did not go away

As Emmett Till did not go away

Your shooting him will not take him from us

His spirit will fill our hearts

Giovanni raises many issues in this poem that can be questioned and analyzed by students. This poem is another example of a living author speaking for a life lost and the injustice that results from the death. Angelou's, "Alone" discusses community and family ties that influence and shape who we become as individuals. In our quest for independence and our own identity, we need to remember the people in our lives.

Now if you listen closely

I'll tell you what I know

Storm clouds are gathering

The wind is gonna blow

The race of man is suffering

And I can hear the moan,

The first line of this poem specifically connects to the topic of voice because it recognizes that if you listen to a person they usually have a message that they are trying to convey. Everyone has their own unique outlook on their life and the world around them if we take the time to listen to what they have to say. It also raises the issue that often people don't listen when others speak thereby ignoring and losing the voice of that person. By denying validation of these voices we do not get the whole picture only parts that we allow to let in. This idea connects to those students who feel invisible or like their voice doesn't matter because they don't have anything to say or no one is listening. This is probably a good opportunity to talk about how I organize my classroom as far as respecting students' ideas and listening to each other speak. I spend a great deal of time in the beginning of the year discussing respect in the classroom building a community of learners. I ask the students to think about what respect looks like and sounds like. It looks like you are maintaining eye contact with the speaker and not reading a book or drawing on your folder. It sounds like one person speaking at a time without side conversations. When students are engaged in a discussion I facilitate by asking one person to begin and then others raise their hands and when the speaker is finished he will call on another student to answer next. This type of organization allows the students to make decisions as opposed to the teacher designating who speaks and who doesn't.

In Hughes', Theme from English B he talks about feeling other attending a white only school and is quest for identity in a world that doesn't accept him because of the color of his skin.

So will my page be colored that I write? Being me, it will not be white. But it will be a part of you, instructor. You are white--- yet a part of me, as I am a part of you. That's American.

Using well know authors in the classroom is beneficial for the students because it allows them to borrow from the professionals. From the authors, students learn new words, technique and can imitate the voice of someone who is established. Allowing students to imitate from other writers encourages them to find their own voice in the process. I would like to use a specific poem entitled "A Poem for Jajuana Cole" featured in the New Haven Advocate last summer. This poem talks about a young girl who was shot and killed last summer in New Haven. It conveys a touching message about the voice of violence and youth and how it affects the members of a community. Poetry is also a great genre to use with English Language Learners because of its compact format which makes it more comprehensible. The resource the *Bronx Masquerade* by Nikki Grimes is a story told through a collection of poems written by inner city high school students. The novel is comprised of a chapter about each student in the class and a student written poem. I would be interested in using this resource to encourage students to write their own poetry expressing their voice about the world around them and how they respond and interact with their world. I would ask the students to create a book much like the *Bronx Masquerade* in which each student writes a chapter describing themselves along with an original poem. For the chapter, I would ask the students to introduce me to themselves, their family, school, neighborhood and describe the way they view the world. I will ask the ELL students to discuss the differences between their native county and the United States. Also, the classroom set that I have of this novel is a modified format containing key vocabulary throughout that helps English Language Learners to comprehend the text.

## Strategies

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### Multiple Readings

One strategy that I often incorporate into poetry reading is multiple readings. Because of poetry's form it easily lends itself to multiple readings. Multiple readings are a great strategy for students to build comprehension and analytical skills about the chosen poem. Generally, I preface the reading by discussing with students that when we read something we usually don't get it the first time. When we read it a second time we discover something that we didn't comprehend on the first reading. On the third reading we build more knowledge. Also, multiple readings allow us to see different ideas that we wouldn't necessarily see on the initial reading.

Sometimes before I have this talk I ask students to tell me about their favorite movie. Movies are good to discuss because students are typically familiar with movies. Then, I will ask them how many times they have seen their favorite movie. Some respond 2, 5, 10 or even 20 times. After, I ask them what they notice about the movie after multiple viewings that they didn't notice the first time they saw it. Often, student responses can be applied to multiple readings of literature and justified as such. When students can make a connection and understand why they are doing something it makes more sense and students are more likely to engage in the activity. This also avoids those problems in which students complain that they've already read the text why do they have to read it again.

The procedure in which I ask students to read the poem is to first read over it once independently. This allows the student the opportunity to briefly familiarize themselves with the word and the structure of the poem. During the first reading the students will not highlight or make any notes just yet. After, I ask students to read a line or two each aloud and we go around the room for the entirety of the poem. Each student will read a line



from the text. During this reading, students will follow along and highlight any words or phrases that stand out for them or are significant in some way. Lastly, I will read the poem aloud. Students will jump in and choral read with me when we get to the lines, words or phrases they have highlighted. I like to read the poem aloud at least twice because the poem takes on voice and poetry is meant to be read aloud.

### **Text Rendering/Most Important Word and/or Phrase**

After we have read the text numerous times, I will ask students to look over the phrases and words that they have highlighted. Then I ask students to choose the most important phrase or word from the text. In their journal, students will write the phrase or word they have chosen and then describe what it means and why it is important to the text. For example, in the poem, "Poem for Jajuana Cole" there is a line that says: "Our world is borrowed from the eyes of our children". A student response to this might explore what this line means by discussing the relationship a parent has to a child and how as parents we often see the world differently after having children. A student might go further to say that this line is important because it demonstrates that all children are precious in the world and all parents want to protect them and make it possible for them to have a better life than they did. This activity allows students to think critically about the text, develop an interpretation and provide evidence to support their theories. It is important to ask students to provide evidence from the text and the world when working through their theories. As far as the importance of the chosen phrase or word, students must explain why they have chosen that portion of the text as opposed to another part of the text. Asking the students to go a further step and explain its importance begins to get to the theme of the poem.

### **Sentence Starters**

When asking English Language Learners to journal I often provide sentence starters to scaffold the lesson. In this particular lesson I would write on the board: I think that this phrase/word means. . .because. . ., I feel that it is important because. . .English Language Learners need to be told that they because is important in the sentence for explanation and clarification purposes, otherwise students will just write one or two words and then stop.

### **I wonder why questions/possible theories**

Another strategy to encourage questioning, theorizing and critical thinking skills is "I wonder why questions". Students will each create one "I wonder why" question about the text; that is, anything that they are wondering about what a character said, or did, or how they acted, anything about the author, the title or the time period that they poem was written. Students need to use the I wonder why format for this activity and not change it to I wonder if or I wonder how. I wonder why asks the students to think critically and interpret the text. After each student creates a question I will ask each student to share while I write the questions on the board or on the overhead projector. When all of the questions are charted I ask the students to choose one question that they want to answer. Students will theorize a possible answer for the question of their choice in their journals. While theorizing students must provide evidence and support for their ideas by looking back into the text and demonstrating where they see that answer addressed in the text and connecting their ideas to the world around them. Students might say in text I see that in line. . .the idea of. . .is discussed or In the world people generally. . .because.

## **Memoir with Sentence Strips**

For the memoir unit, I will model an excerpt of a memoir to the class. For English Language Learners I will read the excerpt aloud and after ask student to write down what happened. This strategy is called oral-written retell. Students will write three to five sentences about what they remembered happening in the text. From the student responses, I will give each student a sentence strip and ask them to write one on their sentences down on the sentence strip. After each student has a sentence strip I will designate three areas of the room as beginning, middle and end. Students will read their sentence strips aloud and decide where the sentences go as far as the beginning, middle and end of the text. After everyone is in agreement we will post the sentence strips on the board in correct sequence. Each student will now have a paragraph made up of all their classmates sentences. This paragraph will act as a summary of the text. Next, students will reread the summary and generate a reaction to the text. I will provide sentence starters like: This reminds me of. . . , I wonder why. . . , I like this part because. . . This part was confusing because. . . etc.

The memoir differs from a personal diary or journal because it is meant to be shared with an audience outside itself. The memoir is different from a diary because unlike the diary which is more private and confessional outlet to work through thoughts and reflections internally the memoir is recognized as being more public. An activity to get students thinking in the direction of a memoir instead of a diary or autobiography would be to describe an event with images. Students will use imagery to create the scene with colors, shapes, tastes, scents, etc that elicit the five senses. An example of an event might be the first day of school. What are all things that you remember about that day? Describe the scene. Did you walk? If so, what did you see, hear, touch along the way? Did you take the bus? What sounds did you hear, what did the bus look like? Discussing the senses of an event allows the writer to recapture the moment and ultimately reclaim the feelings and emotion of the time. Were you reluctant, anxious, nervous, excited about this special day? ELL students might draw the scene and then apply the language especially for those new arrivals that do not have the adequate amount of language to participate in the activity. If they get a picture they can work from that and develop the language afterward.

To begin, I will ask students to create a web or cluster to create a visual chart of the memory they have chosen. If the computer program called Inspiration is available this would be an effective link to technology. In the web, students will write down everything they remember about that event brainstorming ideas and concentrating on sensory language. After the students have created a web they will look over the different ideas and try to explain each in detail in order to begin a working draft. When students have drafted individually, they will pair up with a partner and read their draft aloud. Their partner will make two comments and ask two questions to try get their partner to explore other areas of the memoir. When participating in the read aloud with their partner, students must remember to read aloud their draft. Often when students begin this activity they just hand over their notebook and ask their partner to read it silently. Reading aloud allows the student to catch any grammar or spelling mistakes and also make sure that he/she has really written what they meant to write. When read aloud a student might discover that they really didn't mean to say that or that though made them think of something else that they hadn't included.

## **Say Something**

Students will also use the Kyleen Beers strategy called *Say Something* . This is a during reading strategy in which students receive five different colored cards with various prompts in categories of: Make a connection, Ask a question, Clarify something, Make a predication and Make a comment. While reading the text, students will flip to a card and say something in response to the reading by choosing one of the given prompts to begin



their responses. This reading strategy can be performed orally or in writing. Say something prompts can be used with any text that the teacher requires the student to interact with and generate a response. I have used this strategy with short stories, responding to a novel or poetry.

New Haven schools are at a turning point right now in the switch between bilingual education and a sheltered content classroom. Wilbur Cross High School is the pilot school for Sheltered Content Education. Sheltered Content differs from bi-lingual education because classes are only instructed in English as opposed to bi-lingual classes that are taught in the students' native language. Students at Wilbur Cross High School

have historically been performing very low on standardized tests under the bi-lingual program. The sheltered content initiative is an effort to bridge the gap between mainstream students and ELLs. There is a great deal of controversy about bi-lingual education and what is effective for ELLs. Teachers that have a high ELL population would benefit from reading various articles on the topic (reference in appendix articles discussed in seminar) because of the high population of ELLs in my classes, I chose to incorporate content that addresses the issues of the ELL student in assimilating to American culture while struggling to preserve identity, voice and culture in their native country. I chose various texts that address issues that I believe my students can easily relate to. This is by no means the only issues that students can address but a starting point for discussion.

When you write in school, you usually don't write what you choose. When you write on your own you can look inside yourself and not be "wrong". The initiative in this unit is to allow students to choose what they write about in order to produce more authentic writing and therefore not feel like what they write is bad or wrong. So often, teachers place a label on writing that stifles the creativity of the student. An effective for students is to have them practice writing in various mediums, that is, journaling, memoirs, and poetry and then self reflect on the experience and the process and have the students evaluate their strengths and weaknesses as opposed to the teacher using red ink to "bleed" all over the page and place a letter grade that resonates with the student and deters them from experimenting and taking risks with the writing process in the future. Guidelines and suggestions for writing to be applied to journaling, memoirs and poetry: students need to have the free flow of their ideas without having to worry about errors, spelling and grammar that is so often emphasized in school. In order for students to produce more authentic writing they should follow a few guidelines adapted from Nancie Goldberg's *Writing Down the Bones*: 1. A certain time period should be allotted for writing, whether it is 10 or 20 minutes. In that time the student must write consistently. The pen should never leave the students hand. Even if the student runs out of things to write he should write, "I don't know what to say". 2. Students should cross out, erase or white out their words. Editing their writing interrupts the process. 3. Say whatever comes to mind even if it sounds irrational or something that you normally wouldn't share with someone else. Be bold and take risks. Taking risks in writing is so important for my students as they begin to develop as writers. Many students are reluctant because they think that they don't have anything worthy to say or that their voice doesn't matter. Others might think that their thoughts might be judged and they try to avoid ridicule from their peers. "But it takes courage to share one's life with another, for we live in a world where every sentence penned can be criticized or praised. But it is a risk worth taking, for a greater vision remains: that through our words, be they fiction or fact, we might touch another soul as we share our stories and song." (Waldmen) I often tell students to write like they are having a conversation with someone. Write like they talk and then they don't have to feel like they need to sound a certain way or be someone else when they're "talking" on paper. "Don't be abstract. Write the real stuff." (Goldberg 21).

## Lessons

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### Introduction to Voice

On the first day of our seminar, our instructor showed us an activity that is very appropriate to open a unit on voice.

Into: What is voice? Do you recognize someone by their voice? What qualities are described in a voice?

Through: Students will listen to three very distinctive musical artists and describe what they hear. The first description is very basic: low, high, deep, raspy, strong, weak. Students will then go further by guessing what type of person they imagine the singer to be judged by their voice. It is a good idea to not use music that is popular now because students will already have a picture in their head of what the artist looks like and this activity will not be as effective. A few artists to pick might be: Johnny Cash, Jodi Mitchell, Tracy Chapman or Etta James.

Beyond: Students will write down their ideas individually while they listen to the recording. A discussion will follow about the students' initial description of the voice and their ideas about how the voice describes the individual.

### Memoir

Into: Students will write "I remember" on their paper and journal all of their thinking for 10 minutes about that memory. Another prompt that might be effective is, What is your first memory or tell me about a first in your life like the first time you were kissed or the first time you got your heart broken. A modification for this is using a web or cluster to brainstorm ideas about the event. After, students can write about each idea in more detail.

Through: Students will read a few examples of memoirs. Two good authors I chose to use are Julia Alvarez, *My English* and Gary Soto's *Living Up the Street*. I chose Soto's collection of memoir narratives because they run a time line from when he was five years old to his mid twenties growing up in California. The various stories provide different examples of memoirs for students written in the first person. Also, the particular author is one that my students can relate to culturally but universally discusses themes of adolescence and coming of age that spans across cultures. Another reason that I think these memoirs are appropriate for my students is that the vocabulary is comprehensible for English language Learners. I don't want to turn the students off by giving them a text that they can't understand. Alvarez' *My English* is a text that we read during our seminar and I think that it gives meaning to those students who are trying to preserve their voice while learning a new language. Student authors are also effective strategies to engage the class. My students love looking at the writing of my past students. When they look at student writing they see something that is tangible, not so far removed from themselves as published writing. They also notice mistakes in the student writing and it makes them realize that their writing doesn't have to be perfect either.

Beyond: After studying the samples of memoirs, students will begin drafting their own personal narrative. Students will engage in a writer's workshop after their draft is written. For the writer's workshop, I like students to work in partners reading their draft aloud. When they read their draft aloud they listen for mistakes and if it makes sense or if they really meant to say something or left something out. Another modification of the writer's workshop is placing all the drafts on a table in the center of the circle. Each

student comes up to the table and takes one draft back to their seat with a post it note. After reading the draft students will write on the post-it note and attach it to the draft. Prompts to help the students respond should be provided. Examples of prompts might be: I feel, I think, I believe the writer's truth is, I can relate to this because, I agree/disagree, I like when you.

## Poetry

Into: I like to ask students before starting a poetry unit to get out all of their ideas about what poetry is as well as their feelings toward poetry in general. Often, students feel very strongly about poetry either good or bad. It is useful to know if the students are resistant to a genre because of a negative experience in the past. To introduce the lesson, students will organize themselves in groups of 3-4. With chart paper and markers, students will write down everything that comes to mind about poetry. Some student responses that I've had in the past are: poetry is just for girls, it's romantic stuff, it's like rap, it sometimes rhymes. These responses demonstrate student knowledge of poetry conventions, what they relate it to as well as their personal feelings. Each group will share their ideas and explain briefly why they feel that way.

Through: Students will read three poems. I tried to choose poems that I thought would be controversial, or spark emotion or reaction in my students. I also chose poems that deal with issues that students can easily connect with. The Jauana Cole poem explained earlier in the unit is a really good poem to read when studying voice. This poem is unique because it is a living relative giving voice to a young girl who has passed away, so in effect a living person speaking for the dead. This gives way to conversations about how the dead have a voice, if they have a voice, and how are the dead memorialized by others in order to not lose voice. Unfortunately, so many of my students can relate to death of family and friends. At such a young age, these students need an outlet to voice their emotions about this difficult time in their lives. When I first started teaching at Cross, I noticed that students came to school with pins, some had one pin while others had five or even more. These pins had color photos of people that had died with a quote about them like, "you will never be forgotten" and the dates from birth to death. I noticed that so many students had these pins and it gave me an idea to have students incorporate these memories into their writing. An article was recently published in the New Haven Advocate about pins and the dead entitled, "Art of the living Dead". The article discusses the history of memorializing relatives dates back to the 18th century. Today, students often see their loved one for the last time in the casket and wearing a picture of them that was taken when they were alive gives comfort to those who are grieving with the loss. A friend of a Wilbur Cross High School student that passed away shares, "these are my friends who passed away. It needs to be worn as an eye-opener. There's stories behind these buttons." It is those stories that students can bring out in the classroom writing activities.

Another poem that I would like students to read is Martin Espada's *Niggerlips*. Espada is a New York native whose work can be appreciated by many regardless of age, occupation, class or race. The poem discusses themes of identity, feelings of being other and its effects on the individual. By using this poem, I can initiate a discussion on race and racism. In particular, I would like to discuss the power of words and the meanings behind words. The word, nigger is derogatory and demeaning to many. It has originated from years of struggle and turmoil for African Americans. Many texts include the word nigger to replicate dialogue from a particular time period. For example, Mark Twains' *Huck Finn* uses the word, nigger throughout the novel. This novel has been widely criticized for its use of the word and is banned in many districts. Students might also initiate a discussion on censorship; that is, what are we allowed to read and who dictates what is appropriate and what is not. Many students today use a variation of the word, nigger in their everyday vernacular. By changing the word, nigger to nigga many students argue that by renaming the word it takes on a new meaning, one of brotherhood and empowerment. Others suggest that by continuing to use this word regardless of its variations

is a demonstration of ignorance and negates the struggle to fight racism and the connotations that go along with the word. Some students ignore the word and refuse to say it. Does one give the word more power by refusing to say it aloud? This is one of the questions posed in Emily Bernard's article, "Teaching the N-Word". In this article, Bernard shares her reflections on race as a black professor in an all white classroom. She observes and debates the meaning and usage of the word nigger. Bernard comments on her class discussion and individual conferences with her students and colleagues about race.

Another poem is taken from the New Haven Public Schools tenth grade curriculum entitled, "Brooklyn Heights, 4:00 A.M." by Dana Ferrelli. I believe that this poem is a student poem because I was unable to find any background information about the author. The poem takes place on a stoop in the city. An older woman is watching little girls across the street and reminiscing about your lost childhood. This poem is similar to the Poem for Juana Cole in that they describe the city through the eyes of an individual attending to the senses and the surroundings. As far as voice, these poems are very different from each other. Although the Juanna Cole discusses a little girl who died through violence, the voice created is inspirational and hopeful. The other poem produces a sadder voice, one of a childhood lost on broken dreams much like the broken beer bottles and cigarette filters that surround her. Despite the fact that Jauanna is dead her voice lives on and is more alive then ever through the words of the narrator while the other poem describes disappointment for a life unlived.

Beyond: After reading the poems, students will create I wonder why questions for each. We will chart the questions on the board as a class and then students will choose the question that they want to answer. Students will theorize a possible answer to the question and connect their response to evidence in the poem and in the world; that is what they know about people in general and their experiences. After students will swap journals with a partner, their partner will read the question and answer and agree or disagree with the answer. After agreeing or disagreeing, students will provide an alternative answer to the question.

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