



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

Introduction

Young people learning to read literature need to learn to hear voices. This may be especially true for American readers. The literature of this nation arose in a vital culture of oral performance: sermons, speeches, debates, and drama were crucial forms of expression in early America. This tradition lies behind a continuing preoccupation with voice in American literature: over and over again, American writers imagine themselves not as writing, but as speaking, to their readers. Responding to American literature, we respond to its long history of individual voices.

This seminar explored American literature as the creation of particular speakers in multiple forms: fiction, poetry, and prose. We studied and discussed some of the most famous and arresting American voices -- the poet who calls to us across time and place in Whitman's "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," the entertaining teenager who narrates *Huckleberry Finn*, and the visionary Civil Rights leader who declared, "I have a dream" -- while exploring the rhetorical techniques by which these voices were created, and through which they go on speaking. For voice in writing is always a special kind of illusion through which an author's words, although silent on the page, enter and resound in the reader's mind, full of feeling and implication, conveying multiple kinds of information, and rich in meaning.

Our readings and discussion included, in sequence, some classics of American literature: sermons and speeches by Jonathan Edwards, Patrick Henry, Abraham Lincoln, Sojourner Truth, and Martin Luther King, Jr.; poems by Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson, Robert Frost (and Frost's letters on what he calls "the sound of sense" as well as his lecture "The Imagining Ear") and Langston Hughes; and Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, which we spent two weeks on. We were concerned in all of these classes with the ways in which voice is constructed on the page, and the particular expressive functions of sound in writing.

Twain's novel introduced the question of dialect, and its repeated use of the word "nigger" prompted extended discussion of what it means to use that word. In response to our discussion, I introduced the seminar to an essay called "Teaching the N-Word" by Emily Bernard, a professor of African American literature at the University of Vermont, which speaks about the author's experience discussing the word in her college classroom and some of the meaning the word has had in her life. We also read newspaper articles and personal essays dealing with the question of Black English, including materials relating to the public controversy over the status of Ebonics in the Oakland, California, school system in the 1990s. We read James Baldwin's short essay "If Black English Isn't a Language . . ." and selections from Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple* and Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man*. Ellison's novel, like Twain's, presents a view of American literature as multi-voiced, mixing multiple forms of speech and tradition.

Many of the teachers in our seminar teach students whose first language is Spanish, and we included two

weeks of discussion of Latino/a authors who speak of the experience of learning English, and who reflect on the situation of Spanish speakers in a nation dominated by English. We read essays by and interviews with Richard Rodriguez, and essays and fiction by Julia Alvarez, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Sandra Cisneros.

In an effort to find a contemporary voice that might speak to young people today with the force and relevance many of us remember from J. D. Salinger's Holden Caulfield's first-person in *The Catcher in the Rye*, we pooled suggestions and voted to read together *Push* by Sapphire. Then, in the final class session, each Fellow took part of class time to present a text orally -- some suggesting models of how reading aloud might be used in the classroom, others simply sharing writing that was compelling to them.

My assumption in designing this seminar was that a focus on voice would be a useful way into the study of literature for students of all levels. Students are frequently intimidated by reading and writing assignments. In school, they learn to use language in unfamiliar ways; in a sense, they are learning another language, or, more precisely, they are learning how to use language in unfamiliar ways. The challenge is especially acute for students whose first language is not English.

But most students already understand and have access to the power of language through oral experience, and my hope was to devise ways to draw on this strength as we help students come to writing. Students are indeed more often than not resourceful and expressive speakers and shrewd listeners, well acquainted with the pleasure and power of speech from their daily interactions with each other and their families, and from their experience of music, film, and other media. The seminar aimed to develop conceptual and practical strategies for drawing on students' existing talents by using their oral skills to establish a foundation for their work as writers and readers.

The Fellows took up this project in a wonderful array of ways in a series of curriculum units designed for the full spectrum of the public school system in New Haven. Sean Griffin, for example, uses "Open Mic Fridays" to get his eighth-graders talking about themselves in his unit "The Search for Self: Voices of Adolescence in Literature"; this practice is modeled on Nikki Grimes's novel, *Bronx Masquerade*, the story of a New York school where an open mic classroom discussion becomes the basis for student poems and stories, which Sean's students read and imitate eventually by producing their own writing.

Like Sean's, many of the units focus on the process by which students come to write about themselves and their world, in response to selected readings. This is the project of Dana Buckmir's unit, "Discovering the Voice Within: Encouraging Students to See Themselves as Writers," designed for tenth-graders, which is centered on prose memoir and poetry, which Dana's students study and produce their own versions of. Judy Katz's unit for creative writing and language arts classes, called "Uncovering Your Students' Authentic Voice," has similar goals, while focusing on poetry and poetic technique, and using a "Master/Apprentice" model which encourages students to find their own voices by imitating and responding to powerful literature, from Whitman to Def Poetry. Sandy Friday, in "Searching American Literature to Find and Fall in Love with Your Own Voice," is doing something similar, but in a classroom setting where students have only the most basic literacy skills. Sandy has created a unit that encourages her students to see the process of finding a voice to describe their world and express their feelings as itself a dramatic story with a certain plot. To help students recognize and enter into this plot of introspection, self-discovery, and liberation, she introduces them to a broad range of exciting texts, mostly poems and short stories, which model the project of coming to writing and enhanced self-expression in which they are themselves engaged.

In her unit "The Civil and the Wild in American Discourse," designed for an honors class of high school juniors, Melissa Dailey encourages students to become aware of the demands and opportunities of their own literary

education. Dealing with a broad range of multicultural texts in American literature, Melissa's unit helps students reflect on the "sivilizing" process (to take a word from Huck Finn) in which they take part as they learn to read literary texts and to produce their own writing, both analytic and creative, prose and poetry. Dina Secchiaroli, whose unit includes serious reflection on the question of voice in writing, also encourages a "meta-cognitive" awareness of the learning process in her ninth-grade class. Dina's students are in many cases reading far below their grade level, and may have experienced frustration or unhappiness in school previously. Like Sandy Friday, Dina approaches this challenge by taking introspection and liberation as her theme. Her unit, "Bottled Up: Unlocking the Voice of the Struggling Reader," uses, among other texts, the novel *Bottled Up* by Jaye Murray to lead students toward complex self-expression.

Carlos Lawrence's unit, "Poetry and Prose to Increase Literacy and Writing Skills," is designed for special education students in the eighth-grade, where his challenge is to create a curriculum that can be modified to address students working at very different levels of literacy and with a range of individual needs. "Voice" provides common ground for students with different capacities for reading and writing. The first and third sections of his unit make connections between students' everyday experience and their literary education, the first focusing on "Hip Hop and the Classics," and the third, "What Are We Watching?," on media commercials. The middle section, using historical documents, including the drafts of Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech, introduces students to the revision process.

Matthew Cacopardo, in "The Persuasive Voice: Communication as a Resolution to the Cold War," working with special needs students, also has a historical focus on public speeches, in his case on key speeches during the Cold War. Matthew is interested in the way communication can help resolve conflict, with examples from public life helping students envision how they can use their voices to solve problems in their daily life as well as on the level of the community and nation. His unit is conceived against the backdrop of the war in Iraq.

Susan LaForest has created a unit for bilingual students in grades four through six called "American Voices: The Varied Carols We Sing" -- the second phrase there coming from Whitman. Susan uses a focus on voice to explore some of the various regions and cultures of the United States, in an effort to acquaint students with the nation, its culture, and its history, with an emphasis on the immigrant experience. Ekaterina Barkhatova, in her unit "Hearing Latino Voices as a Way for Students to Understand Their Own Hispanic Identity," proposes a curriculum for Spanish-speaking elementary school students learning English that does not ask them to forget or put aside the Spanish language and their Hispanic culture but instead invites them to build on these resources and indeed to reflect on and deepen their knowledge of them by reading bilingual Latino/a authors, including Gary Soto and Sandra Cisneros. She wants to help her students take pride in their native language and culture even as they learn English and advance in American schools. María Cardalliaguet, teaching Spanish to high school students in New Haven, outlines a unit, called "Voces Latinas: Cultural Identity through Poetry and Lyrics," that introduces students of Spanish as a foreign language to the beauty and cultural richness of the language through a study of multiple expressive forms, including poetry and music primarily. Her unit stresses continuities between Spanish and various Latin American literatures, while enlivening the study of a foreign language with an energetic focus on diverse, compelling music, with accessible but suggestive lyrics.

The idea of voice -- as a key property of written texts, of music and other cultural forms, and above all of the students' speech and experience -- holds together this remarkably diverse but unified array of curriculum units, all addressed to a student body that is diverse in its social make-up and spectrum of individual needs.

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