



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
2012 Volume II: The Art of Biography

A Timeline of Memories and Past Reflections

Curriculum Unit 12.02.06
by Medea E. Lamberti-Sanchez

Introduction

This unit introduces students to five basic principles of biography writing (origins of author, selection of events, subjectivity versus objectivity, archival history, and audience) through a variety of different approaches that can be adapted to fit the needs of all learners ranging from students with learning disabilities to students with extensive, rich vocabularies and backgrounds.

Most of the principles that are taught throughout the unit have emerged from discussions in the 2012 Yale New Haven Teachers' Institute seminar, "*The Art of Biography*", and from the assigned texts by Virginia Woolf, James Shapiro, Robert Caro, Chester Brown, and St. Augustine. Although I would not use any of these books for my middle school students, I think the principles they suggest are highly transferrable to the students for use in their own biographies or autobiographies. I intend to use kid-friendly texts and videos to deliver these same ideas.

A Timeline of Memories and Past Reflections, will be a month-long writing unit designed for middle school students, grades five through eight, but the principles of the unit are universal in nature, specifically and purposely intended to be tailored to fit the high school writing curriculum for students in grades nine through twelve, and for ages ranging from fourteen through eighteen up to college students in an English Composition class, aged twenty and over. The unit addresses the interests of students through reading, writing, sharing experiences, and role playing in order to peak their curiosity about the subject matter. By the end of the unit, the students will choose one of the following: write a biography of another person they know, or write their own autobiography. Each way, the students will have to use the principles of biography to complete the final assessment. Students are thus encouraged to become narrators of their own stories, engaged with the idea of being a creative reader, writer, and thinker.

The unit's focus will be on writing. Throughout the New Haven Public School's curriculum, writing is taught through a series of exercises, and/or lessons in mechanics, vocabulary, and author's craft (figurative and literary devices) all separately. This unit is a chance for students to apply all of the skills learned throughout the year into a finished piece of writing. In addition to learning the elements of writing, students will also read historical biographies of people studied in Social Studies class as well as people that appeal to the students like athletes, singers, dancers, and actors. Presently, only one biography text is used, *Secret Soldier*:

Biography of Deborah Sampson , in addition to the lives of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln, who are studied during Social Studies lessons on the Revolutionary War and Civil War. In order to increase the student's knowledge of how to write a biography, he or she must be exposed to various texts, visuals, and student centered conversations to evoke the mind's senses. The use of visual aids, especially, plays an enormous role in the beginning stages of creating a biography that is individualized and customized to fit the student's life. Most importantly, students get a chance to "talk" about themselves, which we all know, students love to do. Student discourse is the main vehicle for this unit. It is the foundation for rich relationships within the classroom and outside the classroom.

Throughout the writing unit, students will focus on word choice, figurative language, topic selection, organization of the expository essay, elements of the expository essay, and voice development. In each of these direct instructional teaching strategies, there will be small group instruction where the students can peer/share and have a chance to confer with each other using a specific rubric or checklist to follow in order to guide conversations.

Background Information

Currently, I am a regular education fifth grade Language Arts and Social Studies teacher at Betsy Ross Arts Magnet School in New Haven, Connecticut, in an inclusive classroom setting with both regular and Special Education students. Betsy Ross serves both urban and suburban students from surrounding areas of New Haven. It is for this reason that we are an Inter-district magnet school; all students from surrounding areas are encouraged to apply and attend the New Haven Public School System. Betsy Ross is founded on the principle that through the arts, students will learn, think, and see their academics in an innovative, challenging way. Each student attends five academic classes and one specific art class (theatre, dance, photography, etc.) every day. Betsy Ross is a middle school serving students in grades five through eight.

At present, I teach in an inclusive classroom setting with a Special Education teacher. There are two teachers in the room, modeling the co-teaching principle. The Special Education teacher collaborates and consults with me on the modifications and adaptations of the Regular Education curriculum for all four of the academic subjects taught in the room (Language Arts, Social Studies, Math and Science). There are twenty-four students in the classroom, nine of whom have individualized Education Plans, which involve many modifications and adaptations to the regular curriculum. The remainder's functional ability levels range from basic-low leveled learners to advanced learners. The classroom has an array of learning disabilities present that range from the intellectually disabled student to the visually impaired student. This is the only fifth grade class, thus far, participating in the biography unit, but I hope that all four fifth-grade classes will participate in the unit next year. My class is unique in that we have a culturally, diverse group of young people who are extremely artistic and creative with their writings and projects presented in class.

The diversity present within the classroom is rich and will lend itself well to this biography unit. My students fall into four categories: Caucasian, African American, Middle Eastern, and Hispanic. When the students first enter in the classroom in September, they are asked to describe where they are from, their culture, and their traditions. The students offer personal experiences about their siblings, and relatives to further define their beliefs and values. Many conversations emerge from discussions about their dislikes and likes as well as their beliefs on many different topics. Since all of the students are different, these conversations develop into richer

student directed discussions with little prompting from the teacher.

Students enjoy sharing what makes them different from all the others. At one point, the students were asked to bring in a "Me Bag" with five small items that define them, and present to the class the purpose of the items in the bag. Surprisingly, the most popular item that everyone wanted to share was baby pictures, or pictures of themselves from when they were around five or six years old. The comfort level in the classroom rose and stimulated better relationships among the students, which then led to better cooperative learning group exercises. A large part of this biography unit depends upon students being comfortable enough with each other in the classroom to share writing samples and critique the work of others. Throughout the unit, the students have a chance to expose their diverse origins and tell the story of who they are to each other through pictures, essays, and snapshots of selective moments in time.

Language Arts and Social Studies fifth grade curriculum exposes students to both fiction and non-fiction texts, but only one biography is read. Although *The Secret Soldier* is a great story it leaves the students wanting to read more biographies. The curriculum, however, does not include autobiographical texts nor does it leave room for reading additional biographies. The curriculum is divided into the following categories: historical fiction, realistic fiction, and non-fiction expository. The shared reading planner that accompanies each of the texts builds upon prior knowledge, sets a purpose for reading, and asks the students to use the six comprehension strategies (picturing, wondering, connecting, predicting, and figuring out) on a daily basis to increase comprehension of the text. The writing portion of the curriculum focuses on editing and revising skills such as mechanics and grammar, as well as a poetry portion that encourages students to learn figurative language. Expository writing is also taught during the first half of the year in preparation for the Connecticut Mastery Tests.

Rationale:

After looking at the New Haven Public School's district curriculum for Language Arts and Social Studies, recent Connecticut Mastery Tests, and district assessments, I found that the strands that presented students with difficulty were writing and editing/revising. Students did not master the application of skills learned such as how to use quotations or commas appropriately, nor did they elaborate on their details given when writing an expository piece of writing. Students lacked strong organizational skills and strong topic sentences. After looking at the district writing prompts, students did not engage with the topic nor did they use detailed, descriptive words to "spice" up their writing. When the mention is made of a five paragraph essay, I get all sorts of sighs and comments, which indicates to me that some students are not comfortable writers nor are they "excited" about writing or the editing process.

The idea of this biography unit is to get students engaged in their own writing while making vivid connections to personal experiences, other texts, and the outside world. Student centered discussions stimulates mental pictures that can only be seen through imagination, and then transcribed through writing. By encouraging student discourse, the students become part of their own learning and are fascinated with the details of events. Student discourse increases comprehension and builds upon personal experience. The students determine what is the most meaningful information that they would like to include in their written pieces. According to Boise State University's Jeffrey Wilhelm, "By bringing the students' background knowledge to the learning table, students will find ways to connect to the topic and will have activated some basis for creating

meaning for the text they are discussing and students are in charge of their own learning through questions about and discussion of the topic with peers, parents, and teachers." ¹ This inquiry based learning approach promotes student led discussions and invites more learning about the subject. The biography unit would benefit from this approach because students can learn from each other while engaging themselves in the art of writing.

Since the Social Studies lessons did not include biography, the fifth grade team decided to introduce it in November when we were studying European Explorers of the 1400's. We gave the students an explorer and asked them to search for the explorer on the internet, look through books, then provide an explorer report. Some of the reports were on Power Point, acted out, or made into posters advertising the explorer, but as I saw, many students provided a chronological timeline of events which only covered the birth date, death date, and five major events of the explorer's life. The students did not know where to begin, or even what kind of information they needed to include in their report. Some students wanted to write everything about the explorer while others chose to find one or two important details to tell about. There was no real direction given to the students as to how to do the report, and since there was little instruction on what a biography entails, the teachers decided that the students should just do more of an outline of facts accompanied by an illustration or model of the explorer's route taken to the New World.

Next came Black history Month, and the students wanted to read about a famous African American and write about their life. Needless to say, the biography had three components: family life, major accomplishments, and contributions; again, a chronological timeline of events. After talking to the students about the project, they said that they enjoyed reading about the person's life, but inferred that they could not expand their writing any further than what they were asked to do. It was clear after this task that the students needed more instruction on the principles of biography in order to make a project like this make sense and is more accessible for all of the learners in the classroom.

The biography unit will employ several resources besides the shared reading texts and the writing lessons prepared by the district of New Haven to assist in the final version of the unit. Students will use a variety of classroom resources like the internet to access websites on biography like (www.biography.com), and the Library Media Center where thousands of nonfiction books are accessible for viewing and designing notes on the lives of others. In the classroom, books like *Secret Soldier* , and *Abraham Lincoln, a Photobiography* , will be available for students to look through. Students can read and write about the people that they have read and apply some of the principles that they have learned in class to their readings of the biographies. Other videos of historical figures like Benjamin Franklin, Martin Luther King, and Rosa Parks are all great biographical stories geared toward younger children and streamed live through a website called <http://www.unitedstreaming.org>

Objectives

The writing and reading objectives for the students are that they will be able to use a variety of resources that will incorporate the principles of biography to write the biography accurately and concisely. The students previously were taught how to use the Cornell note taking system developed by Professor Walter Pauk, at Cornell University. It allows students to condense and organize their notes. ² The students will draw three sections in their notebooks, one for questions, answers, and a summary. This method will help students pick

only the most important information they learned and use that to guide them through the unit. Students can store the notes in a folder or binder so that it can be looked at later on a shorter, condensed version of notes is better than having a huge amount of notes to keep track of since organization is important throughout the unit.

In addition, students will use graphic organizers like the Venn diagram, which assists in the comparison and contrast of information while the "what we Know, what we Want to know, and what we Learned" (KWL) chart assists in organizing the information into three separate categories, what the students know, what the students want to know, or have learned through the notes provided in the unit. Other essay graphic organizers will be used to help the students write effective essays, and rubrics/checklists will ensure writing success of the final product.

Goal of the Unit:

It is the goal of the unit that the students work cooperatively in groups of threes and fours to read, write, interview each other, publish, and present a biography. It is also the goal of the unit that the students will be able to pictorially represent a specific snapshot of an event through a variety of visual modes suitable for the student (timeline, comic strip, photo collage, etc.)

The students will be guided through the biography writing process by a writing checklist or rubric which will also be used as an assessment tool for the teacher. The checklist will ensure mastery or proficiency of the activity is gained.

It is my hope that my students will gain knowledge of the five principles of the biography, and utilize all the elements of voice, organization, figurative language, and implement them into their future writing skills. I hope that in the future, my students will be able to write an autobiography or biography remembering the skills and knowledge that what was taught to them during this unit.

Standards and Objectives for Reading and Writing, Grade 5:

The Language Arts and writing objectives and standards for this unit will directly align to the Connecticut Mastery 4th Generation fifth grade strands. **The standards for writing include:**

Standard 3: Communicate with others

Students produce written, oral, and visual text to express, develop and substantiate ideas and experiences. How do we write, speak, and present effectively?

3.1 Students use descriptive, narrative, and expository modes.

Students will:

·3.1b. listen to or read a variety of genres to use as models for writing in different modes.

·3.1c use the appropriate features of expository writing

3.2 Students will prepare, publish, and or present work appropriate to audience, purpose, and task.

Students will:

·3.2a determine purpose, point of view, and audience and choose an appropriate written, oral, or visual format.

·3.2b choose from a range of strategies to generate and develop ideas for a variety of writing, speaking, and visual activities.

·3.2c revise text for organization, elaboration, fluency, and clarity

·3.2f publish and or present final products in a myriad of ways, including the use of arts and technology.

The Reading Comprehension objectives include:

- Forming a General Understanding
- Developing an interpretation
- Making Reader/Text Connections
- Connecting and Responding
- Connecting Content and Structure
- Editing

Unit Description:

The first aspect of the unit will focus on teaching the students what each of the five principles of writing a biography are then giving examples of the specific principle in a piece of text, and allowing for students to have both guided and independent practice identifying them and trying them out with each other in the classroom. Through sharing these exercises, the students can see if they can discover the principles on their own, or if they cannot, then how can their classmates help them look for the strategy that was taught in the examples provided to them. Students can highlight information and make notes that can be used for the independent practice part (homework). In every lesson, the teacher will model the strategy, then guide the students toward their own examples, and finally allow for independent practice (homework). One principle will be taught every other day, allowing a day in between to practice and master. Some principles will take a little longer depending on the speed of mastery within the classroom. The unit itself may take longer than a month, if the concepts are not mastered.

The second aspect of the unit will be for the students to begin reviewing the techniques of good writing. The students will have a general review of previously learned skills like the types of literary devices there are present within a good piece of writing, and the elements of a five paragraph essay. Students will look at how figurative language is used to convey powerful, visual images of people within the biographies we are reading and the students will look at how imagery provides a great foundation for the selective events chosen to explain the lives of others. Mini lessons will be weaved throughout these techniques to stress the importance of how all these techniques help to build a good, descriptive, engaging piece of writing.

The third part of the unit will focus on writing a biography or autobiography. This process will begin with student discourse. Student discourse will be the vehicle for plentiful discussions about each other, or the subject matter (text) being taught in the classroom. Students will come up with questions to ask other students whom they are interviewing, and will have a chance to draft ideas as to how the final project will look. Students will work in groups of threes or fours and will be given a guideline to follow that will incorporate all of the aspects taught throughout the unit. Students will begin the first drafts and continue to work until the final version is complete.

The writing process will involve three distinct parts: self conference, peer conference, and teacher conference. Students will read what they have written to the group (mixed leveled learners) and look for ways to make the writing more descriptive by using the TAG strategy, or (tell someone what you liked, ask questions to the writer, and give suggestions), one strategy for writing previously taught in the class. Then students will be given the checklist for them to see if the writing is clear, and concise to others. Next, the students will group conference through a pair/share, where another student will read the work of the other and provide help with mechanics. A higher leveled student should be paired with a lower leveled student to help ensure that assistance is given to the students who need it when I am unavailable to assist. At this time, they will look for errors like spelling, mechanical, or writing that is not clear to them. The checklist for writing will encourage students to check off the areas where the writing needs commas, punctuation, or a clearer topic sentence. There will also be a chance for students to check to make sure the writing is imaginative and engaging to read. Lastly, my role will be to discuss the writing with the students, prompt more ideas to be discussed with the classroom groups, and recheck for spelling or mechanical problems within the piece of writing. During the group discussions and conferencing, I will monitor, circulate, and offer feedback for discussions, making sure that everyone is an equal participant in the group process. I do not want one person to dominate the group while others do not get a chance to participate, or do not participate at all.

The Five Principles of Biography:

The unit will focus on the five essential philosophies of the biography. The principles were developed through our Yale New Haven Teachers' Institute discussions this summer. They are as follows: the origin of the author, the selection of events, the perspectives of the author and subject, the archival history, and the audience.

At the introduction of the unit, the students will be asked to write about who they are and where they came from. This activity will allow students to describe his or her character traits using adjectives to describe friends, family, and his or her self. This is the first stage to writing, learning about the author without explicitly stating it. I would like to see students bring in objects and show the class something that represents them, while the others guess what significance it may have to the person. What does the object tell about the

person? What does the picture show about where the student grew up, or what their brothers or sisters' ages are? The students in the classroom can jot down or write about the person who is presenting without being aware of what the person is really like. The person does not have to say anything but show his or objects and the audience will know what his or her life is made up of.

The selective process of the biography is the second stage whereby the student will choose to write about an event or a brief episode in time to illustrate the importance of the event. In this stage, the student learns that the author must decide what the most significant event is to focus on because not every single event is depicted within a biography. The author learns early on that he or she must select only major events to portray otherwise the biography would be millions of pages long. Here, the students will be asked to write a five paragraph expository essay explaining an important event that happened in their life and give three reasons why it was significant.

The third stage is showing that no two perspectives are the same. The relationship between the author and the subject's views are different. Two students will be asked to compose a biography of one other student in the classroom, and then compare the essays looking at how the essays are similar and different to each other. Students will interview the candidates and ask questions to focus on for their own biographies and see how the essays are an accurate portrayal of the person. Students will get a first-hand look at bias is an area where students will get a firsthand look, at how one perspective is very different than another's perspective.

The last two stages will center on the sources of the information as well as the audience. A lot of times, information that is left behind and placed into biographies are based on items, documents, papers, or journals. The students will learn that items kept from when the person was younger, tells some things about who the person is, but it does not provide much more information, thus requiring the author to rely on assumptions of what the item might have stood for. The students will be asked to write about an item that they will leave behind, and pretend that it was dug up one hundred years from now; what would the item say about them? Lastly, the idea of audience will be discussed. Who are the students writing for? Are they writing for an unknown audience or for their classmates? My students will make this choice themselves. I would also like for them to present their written work in front of another class, so they can practice fluency and clarity. I want the students to "have fun" learning about the biography, because too often they think it "boring". If I can get the students engaged in writing their own biographies and autobiographies, then maybe they will change their minds.

Although the five principles are essential to teach, I would like to explore the idea of exaggeration within the biography of "playing around" with boundaries. How much can one exaggerate? Will the students stretch realities, or will they keep the information they give very straightforward, or will they do both? I would also like to explore how far the students' imaginations extend when discussing the archival stage of the biography. Will some students find it interesting to take an object and try to imagine all of the details that surround it? Is there a limit to what pieces of evidence the item has to offer, or will the students just base their assumptions solely on what is present, involving no imagination at all?

Introduction to the lessons on the Biography:

I will begin this unit with the questions: What is a biography? Have you ever read a biography? Are biographies fiction or non-fiction, or both? I will chart responses of the students. A discussion will then follow as to what a biography is and how it applies to their lives. As the students are discussing the nature of biography, I will ask them to provide examples of biographies that they have read and would like to read and why. This discussion will serve to provide me with an insight as to what the students need to be taught and what they already know about the genre. I will also tell the students that they have to revisit the idea of "stretching out the truth" when writing. I will also talk about the importance of humor when writing a biography. All of these elements will help the students reach the final goal.

As we move forward with the unit, the students will continue adding to their KWL chart and keeping track of what skills they have learned with their Cornell notes kept in their Language Arts notebook to be referenced later on. The Cornell notes will help the students to organize their notes and be able to retrieve them later on when writing the final product.

Although there will be mini texts that will be used, the two referenced texts are the Social Studies book, *Our United States*, and the shared reading text, *Secret Soldier: The story of Deborah Sampson*. The Social Studies text book provides lessons on the lives of historical figures like Abraham Lincoln and George Washington as well as many others, while the *Secret Soldier* provides students with a chronological journal of a woman disguised as a soldier during the Revolutionary War. Many of the events taking place in the book are focused to align with certain dates of the Revolutionary War. The students enjoy reading this text because of the details that are given about what was happening during the war. It is time ordered and can be a bit boring at times, except for the description of Deborah Sampson being shot in the leg which the students are attracted to. They were fascinated with the description of how she was shot because the author dramatized Deborah's emotions and painted a highly-colored scene filled with suspense.

The social studies book can provide an example of information that includes three specific sections: childhood, young adulthood, and adulthood. This example can point out, whether or not it is important for the writer to include childhood as an important piece of information for the audience to know. These two examples are very different and serve two different purposes in the unit and can serve to provide many examples of the elements of the biography.

Classroom Activity One: Omar's Identity

According to Hermione Lee's ³, "Biography tells the story of a person, it requires, or assumes, a way of thinking about identity and selfhood...writers of, and about, biography discuss the best ways to represent a self: shall it be through anecdote, revelatory incidents, descriptions, conversation, or encounters with others..."

The first classroom activity will ask Omar to tell his classmates an anecdote that is funny about where he comes from and who he is without explicitly telling his classmates the exact details of his life. Omar will tell his

classmates small details about his favorite hobbies, and provide an adjective that describes him. The other students can jot things down, or even ask questions about who he is. His story will be meant to be fun, or amusing, so hopefully Omar will tell it in an amusing way. An anecdote is one way that Omar will be able to provide insight about his life.

Omar walked into his writing class at Betsy Ross Arts Magnet School where they were writing about topics like favorite fourth grade moments, favorite subjects, or family life. He enters the classroom at a much later time than the other students, and notices that his classmates are seated in a circle in the middle of the classroom. Each student has already begun to write and share their personal story and is waiting patiently for Omar to tell a story about himself. Mrs. Sanchez told Omar to tell his story in an entertaining manner. Mrs. Sanchez continued initiating a conversation with Omar about his favorite subject and asked him to describe who he is using one single colorful adjective. Some of his classmates knew Omar from another school and knew he was quite the entertaining fellow, but the few students who did not know Omar previously noticed that the way he conveyed his story showed just how colorful he really was. He talked about a favorite moment in his life when he went on a trip to see his aunt and his uncle in Florida. Omar decides to tell about his trip, but he was very selective in what he chooses to tell the class about that experience, which leads us into the second principle, the principle of selectivity.

Classroom Activity Two: A Selective Memory

Omar continues his story about his trip to Florida, but stops when he talked about what happened to his Grandfather while he was on vacation. Omar did not want to reveal any information about what happened to his grandfather, so he decided to leave it out. It was a short period of time, in which he was asked to talk, so he really could not go into much more than whatever he shared. Instead, Mrs. Sanchez asked Omar to draw the rest of the story, so that he could decide what he wanted to expand on or reveal little of. The process of selection was made easier for Omar because he chose to share what he wanted to graphically and was not forced to reveal verbally that his Grandfather suffered an accident and was hospitalized.

The next part of this lesson would be to write the five paragraph expository essay using as much elaboration as needed to express the details of the events. Omar would then be asked to select three different parts of his Florida trip that he would like to talk about in the body of the essay and use graphic organizers to vividly explain his trip. When Omar's essay was finished, Mrs. Sanchez asked him to share his essay with John and Maria in order to hear their responses and, in turn, create an interview of questions in which John and Maria will write their biography of Omar. John and Maria have asked Omar three questions about his trip to Florida: (1.) what activities did you enjoy during your trip and what do they say about your personality? (2.) What kinds of foods did you enjoy on your trip and how do the foods you ate describe your personality? (3) And lastly, what items did you bring with you to Florida and what do these items say about you? Mrs. Sanchez told both John and Maria to decide what they would like to include in their biographies of Omar. The process of selection plays a role in objectivity.

Classroom Activity Three: Subjectivity versus Objectivity

John and Maria were given the task of writing a biography of their friend Omar. Omar sat down with them and answered the three questions given to him, and as he did, John and Maria wrote down the answers. It was the intent of Mrs. Sanchez to help John and Maria paint a portrait of Omar's identity just by his responses to the three questions. John and Maria learned that Omar enjoyed going to the beach and swimming as well as enjoyed adventurous activities that included hiking, boating, and fishing. John and Maria also learned that Omar's favorite item that he brought with him was his portable video games which indicated that he loved to entertain himself and challenge his mind through role-play. The class was surprised by the very different interpretations of Omar that presented itself through the three biographies. Was Omar represented accurately? Mrs. Sanchez's point to the activity was that each writer had very different perspectives of who Omar really was, but the problem the students in the class are facing is that which biography of Omar are they going to trust- John or Maria? Well, Mrs. Sanchez then offered another activity: Let's go back to the response to the question of which items he took to Florida and what if we asked Omar to pick an item that he took to Florida and buried it outside the classroom in the ground in a box. What would that prove about his days in Florida? Mrs. Sanchez asked her class, how can we prove something? Maria raised her hand and said "evidence". Mrs. Sanchez said, "That's right, the item will be our proof, or another name for it, archives. This class will lead us to the fourth principle-the reliability of archives.

Classroom Activity Four: the Proof's in the Pudding

Mrs. Sanchez introduced the idea of archives by prompting what the students know about an archive. She asked them to give a definition of archives, and explained to them that sometimes the archive help fill in the gaps of information that was unknown, and also helps to explain the significance of the day in question. Mrs. Sanchez compared this idea to an investigator where clues are left behind for the detective to seek out and try to make sense of. The class was told to pretend Omar's portable video game player was buried in a box outside the school and then dug up fifty years from now. What would this say about the technology of today versus future's technology? Mrs. Sanchez asked the class if this video game could possibly give us information about Omar's trip to Florida, and the students' responses were varied. John replied that he did not think that the portable video game player would tell anything about Omar's trip, and the class agreed. The students were then asked to track their lives for the next week in a journal, so that they have a record of what they have done, ate, or where they went. When the week's record is complete, Mrs. Sanchez asked that they place all of their papers in a file that she will keep in the closet until June 20th to be shared with others. Keep in mind that the activity will be done early on so that by the time June comes, there would have been nine months lapse, so that the archives will show the events of the week tracked by the students. In June, the students will get back their record of the week they had in September and will be asked to use their imagination to fill in the information that they did not have written down in their records. Mrs. Sanchez found that most of the students forgot about the particular week that was tracked so the students had to guess what happened just as Omar had to guess why he brought his game player to Florida and misplaced his game. John and Maria, as well, as the rest of the class had to imagine using vivid details what happened, why it happened, and when it happened. Using the archives, the students had a chance to begin writing their first draft of their autobiography or biography and upon completion, share or role-play with another fifth grade Language Arts

class. The writers of Mrs. Sanchez's class needed an audience.

Classroom Activity Five: Performance

Now that all the hard work is done, the class must decide who they are writing their autobiographies or biographies for. In this case, the audience they are writing for happens to be another class. The students will practice their oral speaking presentations first in front of the class with fluency and cohesiveness before sharing with another class. The audience is known, and the students have a choice when presenting if they would like to share a selective memory or share the entire piece of work. Before sharing and presenting, the students must work together to edit and revise the work making sure that the piece makes sense, uses descriptive words, and elaborates on all details. Students can accompany their work with illustrations if they choose, or may even want to have another student rehearse their biography as a role-playing activity, whereby John is pretending to be Omar, or vice versa. The audience will have a chance to respond to the students and provide feedback that is positive and informative. Mrs. Sanchez hopes that by doing all these activities that the students will have fun writing and sharing their work with an audience other than the classmates present within the room.

Bibliography

Borg, Mary. *Writing your Life* . Colorado: Fort Collins, 1998. This book is an easy to follow guide to writing your own autobiography.

Lee, Hermione. *Biography: A Very Short Introduction* . New York: Oxford University Press, 2009. An entertaining book that explains what biography does and how it works.

McCloud, Scott. "Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art". McQuade and McQuade, *Seeing and Writing 4* , 711-735. Scott McCloud presents the relationship between the graphic novel and the biography.

McQuade, Christine, and Donald McQuade. *Seeing and Writing 4* . New York and Boston: Bedford/St. Martin, 2010. This book has a variety of articles concerning the pairing of words and images to visual representations.

Pauk, Walter. *Taking Effective notes preparing to take notes starting with the Cornell System: Gathering Information tying things together*. Section 10. How to Study in College 8th Edition. New York: Wadsworth Publishing, 2007. This section focuses on how to use Cornell notes effectively.

Rollyston, Carl. *Biography: A User's Guide* . Chicago: Rowman and Littlefield Publishing Group, 2008. This book provides an inside look at the idiosyncratic issues around the biography.

Stempler, Ephraim. "25 Ways to Get Kids Writing". *Instructor: Back to School* , no. 1. Scholastic, Inc, 2010. This is a short article summarizing twenty-five creative ways for getting students to write more often using graphic organizers.

Thomas, Abigail. *Thinking about Memoir* . New York: Sterling Publications, 2008. The book is about writing a memoir.

Wilhelm, Jeffrey. "Inquiry based learning" *Inquiring Minds: Learn to read and write: 50 Problem Based and Literacy Learning Strategies*. Canada: Scholastic, Inc. 2009. This article of the book focuses on the techniques of inquiry based learning in the classroom.

Zousmer, Steve. *You Don't Have to Be Famous to Write Your Own Biography*. Cincinnati Ohio: F& W Publications, Inc. 2007. This book provides helpful tips to write your own great biography even if you are not famous.

Student Reading List of Friendly Biographies:

Berne, Emma Carlson. *Christopher Columbus*. New York: Sterling Publishing, 2008. This book is a short biography on Christopher Columbus outlining his travels and expeditions.

Edgers, Geoff. *Who was Elvis Presley?* New York: Grosset and Dunlap, Penguin Young Readers Group, 2007. The book takes a very entertaining spin on biography dedicated to the "King" of music.

Gin, Silver Burdett. *Our United States*. New York: Harper Collins, 1997. This is the Social Studies text used for the fifth grade curriculum.

Mannis, Celeste-Davidson. *Who was William Shakespeare?* New York: Grosset and Dunlap, Penguin Young Readers Group, 2007. William Shakespeare's life comes to life in this student-friendly biography.

Mattern, Joanne. *Princess Diana*. New York: DK Publishing, Inc. 2006. This particular biography of Diana's life is told through a series of photographs that are the main vehicle of how the text is conveyed.

McDonough, Yona. *Who was Harriet Tubman?* New York: Grosset and Dunlap, Penguin Young Readers Group, 2002. Harriet Tubman's life takes shape throughout this chronological account of her life.

McGovern, Ann. *The Secret Soldier: Biography of Deborah Sampson*. New York: Scholastic, Inc. 1975. A true story of a young woman pretending to be a soldier in the Continental Army.

Teacher Internet Sources

<http://www.biography.com/>. This site provides a variety of exclusive biographies of people that can be viewed or read.

<http://homeworktips.about.com/od/biography/a/bio.htm/>. This site provides a basic overlook of how to write a biography including examples of interesting thesis statements and interesting details that should be included.

<http://www.unitedstreaming.com/>. This site is for downloading biography videos used in class

<http://www.neiu.edu/>. This site explains inquiry based learning and arts integration

<http://www.wikihow.com/Write-an-Autobiography/>. This site provides helpful hints to writing an autobiography

<http://www.howtowriteabiography.org/>. This site provides information of what should be included in a biography

<http://www.readwritethink.org>. This site provides an article that discusses using role-play to explore author's lives.

<http://www.reading.org>. This site is dedicated to the Journal of adolescent and adult literacy where they have a great article on the effectiveness of role play in the oral traditions.

<http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/>. This site has great links to teachers' lesson plans on biography for others to use

<http://www.ncte.org/>. The National Council of Teachers of English has thousands of articles and journals that are available to research.

Internet Sites for Students

<http://gardenofpraise.com/leaders.htm>. A website dedicated to biographies of famous Americans throughout history. Students can play biography games about the individuals, including puzzles and riddles.

<http://1000biographies.com/>. Another website where students can research simple, easy to read, biographies of current people and historical people

<http://www.ala.org/>. The American Library Association has great websites for kids on biographies

Implementing District Standards

Forming a General Understanding:

A-1: Students will determine the main idea (non-fiction) or theme (Fiction) in a written work

Developing an Interpretation:

B-1: Students will draw conclusions about the author's purpose for choosing a genre or for including or omitting specific details in text

B-3: Students will use stated evidence from the text to draw and/or support a conclusion.

Making Reader/Text Connections:

C-1: Students will make connections between the text and outside experiences and knowledge

C-2: Students will select, synthesize, and/or use relevant information within a written work to write a personal response to the text.

Examining the Content and Structure:

D-1: Students will analyze and evaluate the author's craft, including the use of literary devices and textual elements

The three Connecticut Mastery Test fourth generation strands will be widely used throughout the unit when reading the selected texts. Throughout the readings, the students will be asked to analyze and evaluate the elements that support the principles of biography like the author's purpose for omitting specific information, or including specific information. The students will also be asked to make real life connections between themselves and the principles of biography. Students will have the opportunity to select relevant information that is gathered throughout the lessons and use them to compose their personal piece of writing.

The following writing objectives are implemented during the writing phase of the unit in which the students will choose either an autobiography or a biography to write. The students will use writing organizers to clearly organize their information that is collected throughout the unit. The writing lessons will incorporate cooperative group exercises whereby the students will have to listen, respond, and revise each other's writings for mechanic or grammatical mistakes. An awareness of sensory words and figurative language will take precedence in order to make sure that the students have provided enough information to create mental, vibrant pictures for the audience. Perhaps the biggest component of the writing portion is that the students are willing to share ideas and discuss information that is relevant to the principles discussed in class.

Writing Objectives/Indicators of Mastery:

Students will use graphic organizers and notes to plan their ideas and writing piece

Students will use precise words to give details

Students will use sensory words to give the reader a picture in their mind

Students will willingly share writing with peers and talk about their writing piece during a shared conference.

Students will respond to the writing of their peers and use rubrics to reflect on writing.

Students will willingly participate in the writing lesson and articulate ideas for a variety of poems

Students will use appropriate punctuation in their writing.

Students will use the right words in their writing

Notes

1. Wilhelm, Inquiring Minds, 125.
2. Pauk, How to study in college, section 10, "Taking Effective Notes,:" 250
3. Lee, Hermione, Biography: A Short Introduction

<https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu>

©2019 by the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, Yale University

For terms of use visit <https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu/terms>