



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

Introduction

This seminar, intended chiefly for teachers of history, social studies, and English, sought to encourage the use of biography (including autobiography) as a method of instruction in the classroom. Everyone has a life worth recalling, even if only to one's family or to one's self: learning itself, if by that we mean accumulated experience, is a form of biography. Maybe that's why biographies, whether in print or electronic editions, continue to be so widely read.

How, though, do you go about writing a life, whether it's your own or someone else's? Because I've been working on a biography myself – of the 20th century American diplomat and strategist George F. Kennan – I've tried to learn something about the subject by teaching it for over a decade to Yale undergraduates. This is the course I've adapted for the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, with a particular focus on several things:

First, the reading and critical discussion of biographies and autobiographies, selected with the help of the seminar to reflect a range of subjects and approaches. I wanted the list to include both good and not-so-good biographies, because I think you can learn at least as much from each. I wanted the emphasis to be as much literary as historical, because biography – which is really about character – relies as much on the skills of novelists as of historians. And I wanted to explore particular genres of biography, ranging from the first great autobiography (St. Augustine's *Confessions*) through graphic biography, the latest innovation in the field (Chester Brown's life of Louis Riel).

Second, to try to extract from these readings – again with the help of the seminar – certain principles of biography that can, with appropriate adaptation, be "teachable" across a wide range of age groups and student skill levels. I was fortunate enough to have teachers working with first- through twelfth-graders, many with special needs. Without the years of classroom experience my teachers brought to our seminar, we would hardly have been able to connect principles with practice as thoroughly as we did.

Third, based on the readings they had done and the principles they had identified, each of the teachers in my seminar produced a curriculum unit for use in their own classrooms and we hope in others, meant to engage students in the reading and actual writing of biographies or autobiographies. My summaries of these follow.

Medea Lamberti-Sanchez's unit, designed for fifth-grade language arts and social studies students but applicable at more advanced grade levels, draws explicitly upon the biographical principles we identified in the seminar. ¹ After introducing these through classroom discussion, training in note-taking, and visual representations, Medea will separate her students into small groups for the purpose of interviewing each other, composing, and "publishing" a biography – that is, presenting it to the class as a whole. Her unit shows in detail how the students will discover for themselves the relevance of each principle to their own "work in

progress." They will emerge from this experience not just with a clear understanding of what biography is, but also having wrestled themselves with the problems it presents.

Three of the units developed in our seminar move beyond Medea's focus on how to do biography to specific experiences in students' lives. Each deals in a different way with something they know a lot about: contemporary urban violence.

Tara Stevens, in a social studies unit designed for eighth-graders, confronts this issue head-on. Every one of her students, she writes, has experienced either the direct or indirect consequences of violence. At that age, though, they are too young to know how many others, in both the present and the past, have shared such horrors. Tara will ask her students, under careful monitoring, to talk and write about their experiences; but she will also have them read selections from fictional and non-fictional works – dating as far back as Homer's *Iliad* – to make the point that they are not alone. The students will then reflect, in a final essay, on what that awareness means to them.

Sean Griffin, who teaches language arts also to eighth-graders, approaches the issue of violence by another route. Building on what his students have already learned about the American civil rights movement of the 1960s, he will have each of them to focus on a particular leader with a view to determining what caused him or her to assume that role. In doing so, Sean will introduce the concept of "turning points" in biography: the fact that lives so often take a particular direction in response to a particular event. Sean's students will write about these critical moments; they will also stage them through role-playing. The concluding class project will be a video "documentary," in which Sean's "leaders" will explain what impelled them to lead.

Jesus Tirado, a teacher of tenth-grade American history, has also developed a unit on violence, but has set it further back in time. Impressed by a student's comment that Matthew Brady's Civil War photographs reminded her of the violence she herself had witnessed, Jesus will use the history of that conflict to show how complex and intertwined the roots of violence can be. His students will focus on a single month, April 1861, first establishing a chronology of what happened, using contemporary newspaper sources now available online. From this, the students will identify broader causes of the crisis – for example slavery, or sectionalism, or abolitionism – tracing these as far back as they think appropriate. They will then research advocates of these causes, in order to role-play them. Jesus will conclude his unit with an in-class simulation of the events that took place during that critical month, thereby expanding his students' perspective on what they have themselves experienced.

Four teachers in the seminar took on another important issue in biography: what are the origins of artistic creativity?

Christine Elmore and Waltrina Kirkland-Mullins are, respectively, first- and third-grade language arts teachers whose curriculum units – designed for use through sixth grade – will allow students to explore the lives of successful authors/illustrators. Christine will introduce her first-graders to the writings of Cynthia Rylant, Mem Fox, and Ezra Jack Keats. She will provide them with biographical information drawn from interviews with these authors, as well as a carefully framed set of questions designed to elicit her students' curiosity about connections to their writings and drawings. Waltrina, working with third-graders, will take them one step further: they will conduct their own interviews, electronically or in person, with Floyd Cooper and Yangsook Choi. Both curriculum units will thereby present, to elementary school students, one of the most significant dilemmas confronting any literary biographer: to what extent does creativity reflect actual experience, as against imagination?

Shakespeare biographers have wrestled with this issue for a long time, with inconclusive results. Matthew Monahan, who teaches English to twelfth-graders, will let them try their hand at resolving it by having them view excerpts from the critically-acclaimed 1998 film *Shakespeare in Love*, comparing its dramatization of the origins of *Romeo and Juliet* and *Twelfth Night* with the limited historical record that's available to us. They will then write autobiographies, making their own decisions about what combination of real and imagined experiences to include. They'll check what they've written against a modern autobiography, Richard Wright's *Black Boy*. And they'll conclude by participating in a sonnets "slam," some drawn from Shakespeare, some composed by themselves, to give them a sense of the link between life, art, and performance.

Marialuisa Sapienza, another teacher of English in the eleventh and twelfth grades, will show her students into this connection in a different way. Her unit focuses on Virginia Woolf's biography of the painter Roger Fry. Fry's pictures, it's widely acknowledged, influenced several of Woolf's novels and short stories. Woolf returned the favor, after Fry's death, by writing his biography. Marialuisa's students will view Fry's art and that of other artists of his era, while reading works by Woolf that appear to have been inspired by Fry. They will then prepare a written analysis of an excerpt from Woolf's writing, as well as an autobiographical essay focusing on connections they themselves have made to the visual arts. They will in this sense be exploring the relationship between biography and painting, a particularly vivid form of creativity.

But what about biography not written at all, but spoken, or even drawn? The remaining two teachers in the seminar are exploring these possibilities.

Crecia Cipriano teaches French to seventh-graders. Her unit is designed to improve their conversational skills, while illustrating the global reach of the French language. She will have her students create "Fauxbook" profiles, along with facsimile passports. These will provide ways for them to introduce themselves to each other in French; but they will also open up the possibility of "introducing" famous French speakers – politicians, movie stars, athletes, even cartoon characters like Tintin – not all of whom are from France. The purpose of the unit, through the use of biography and autobiography, is to make the learning of French both relevant and fun.

Jon Aubin, a teacher of ninth-grade English, has created a unit that will teach biography through his students' interest in graphic novels. Jon will introduce them to an increasingly sophisticated set of illustration techniques, with a view to instilling confidence in their own drawing skills. He will have them read and discuss a graphic novel that will show how these techniques work in practice. The students will then prepare autobiographies in a graphic format, using what they have learned about visual dramatization, about the need to select what can appear in a single frame, about how frames relate to one another. Graphic biography, Jon points out, has been around since the cave paintings at Lascaux. So what seems to us an innovative form of biography is actually a very old one, certain nonetheless to elicit enthusiasm from today's visually-oriented students.

My seminar Fellows and I have learned a lot from working on these curriculum units, and we hope they'll be helpful to others. I'm grateful to have had the opportunity, once again, to work with these dedicated teachers, and to the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute for having provided it.

1. These were: (a) the inseparability of identity from history; (b) the necessity of selection in conveying that history; (c) the inevitability of subjectivity in making such selections; (d) the utility — but also the limitations — of archives in evaluating subjective judgments; and (e) the biographer's responsibility to be fair in representing his or her subject to an audience.

<https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu>

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

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