



Real People, Real Lives: Biographies of Presidents

Curriculum Unit 13.01.08
by Joan Marie Meehan

Introduction

How do I get my students engaged? How do I ensure that what they are learning is relevant to them? How do I make an impact with what I do in Third Grade that will carry over into the years that follow? These are the questions I ask myself every day. Every teacher strives to answer these questions. Children at this age show a curiosity and passion to explore the world and this is something that I can draw upon in my teaching of nonfiction reading and writing ¹. If we, as elementary school teachers, can get students engaged and excited about nonfiction then hopefully that excitement will carry over to the years that follow. My goal for this unit is to inspire my students to want to learn more.

If you ask my students to name some presidents they will name George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and Barack Obama. For the most part, students know only those "famous ones" but don't really know much about the other forty one men who have held the most important office in our country. Around the time of President's Day, I realized that my students were lacking in this area, and I saw this as a wonderful opportunity to enlighten them. I could introduce them to the presidents while introducing the genre of biography and, in the process, hopefully, inspire them. Could I create a spark of interest not about just this one significant individual from the past, but possibly engage them in the importance and relevance of learning history?

With the implementation of the new Common Core Standards, discussions about the new Language Arts standards inevitably turn to the overwhelming percentage of nonfiction that is expected.

[T]he Common Core dictates that by fourth grade, public school students devote half of their reading time in class to historical documents, scientific tracts, maps and other informational texts . . ." ².

Although this seems like a big challenge, students are generally interested in nonfiction, and if I can grasp and hold their attention and interweave nonfiction and fiction, this transition will happen smoothly. Biographies seem like such a captivating genre with which to engage students. Biographies give extensive information about the subject but have more of a plot than textbooks which can make biographies more appealing to students. If my students are expected to read and write nonfiction extensively over their school careers, I feel that it is my responsibility to get them excited for learning through nonfiction. This introduction to informational texts could also introduce them to other historical documents, maps, etc. that they may encounter in their biography reading that will be required reading over their academic years. According to Lucy Calkins, "the impulse toward research and nonfiction writing needs to be nurtured during the early childhood years." ³ As an elementary school teacher, I believe it is my job to encourage my students to read as much nonfiction as possible. By cultivating a climate in my classroom where nonfiction becomes as enjoyable as fiction I will foster the impulse for students to choose both fiction and nonfiction in their reading selections.

In starting my research for this project, I am finding myself engrossed in the volume of information out there about presidents. I feel every president I begin to research becomes relevant for one or more of my students. From Andrew Jackson who got into fights at school and lost his parents and brothers at a young age to Dwight Eisenhower who came from a poor family to Theodore Roosevelt who was often sick as a child. Each of these notable people could touch something in a student that may spark not only a love of learning but a sense of kinship with someone who made a difference. Children love reading about how people achieved their success and the obstacles they overcame along the way. In our school district, I feel it is ever so important to instill in our students the idea that obstacles can be overcome. By having each student research and present on a different president, students will be introduced to the struggles and successes of so many.

Overview

Targeted to students in Grade 3, but able to be modified to accommodate students in Grades 2, 4, and 5, **Real People, Real Lives: Biographies of Presidents** will help young learners examine key aspects of the lives of a president through a biographical lens. This study will be achieved through hands-on research culminating in written essays and informative oral presentations. Students will also delve into the world of historical fiction working in literature circle groups to examine historical fiction that coincides with the time period that their researched person lived. As an extension activity, students may be paired up to create fictional conversations and interactions that might have happened in the lives of the presidents that they have studied.

The unit will introduce students to all important research skills. Although students are new to research and will need a good deal of modeling, they will be expected to acquire research skills for both print sources (for example, books and articles) and non-print sources (such as websites). They will be required to access and evaluate information and, with minimal help, be able to choose relevant facts among those they read. Students will learn note-taking strategies which will be used to write an expository essay. We will utilize graphic organizers and rubrics will be created which will take student input into account. There will be modifications in graphic organizers and level of independence for those students with special needs. At the end of the unit, students will present their final projects in the form of a research paper and oral presentation.

The research the students will be doing will also allow them to establish a foundation on which to build while exploring the worlds of nonfiction and fiction that is set in historical times. Students will be able to extend

their research beyond the president whom they are investigating to include the time period when the person served and/or lived. As an extension activity, students will be encouraged to write an historical narrative piece that would coincide with the time that their famous person lived. This type of activity lends itself to the reading of many interesting historical fiction pieces that would hopefully pique students' interests. The biographies and historical fiction stories that are read will foster connections for my students with people from history in a way that reading an historical textbook mostly likely would not.

As a springboard activity, in a whole group setting, I will model with the class how to research a president using George Washington as our focus. Ideally, I will partner up with another teacher who will research Barack Obama. These are two presidents that most students seem to be familiar with and so it will be a good introduction to how to go about finding information through research and not just using what you know or think you know about a person. Students from both classes will then be filling in the middle with research on the presidents from George Washington to Barack Obama. We will use key questions and incorporate both print material as well as websites to fill in a graphic organizer before constructing an essay and first person oral presentation. At each stage of our unit, we will refer back to our whole group study. Upon completion of independent research and writing, students will work with partners on editing, proofreading, and revising, in order to produce a finished product to share with our school community.

Biographies and Historical Fiction

In deciding to introduce nonfiction in this way to my students, I had to ask what would be the best way to get them and keep them engaged. With many students, history is something that they view as the past with many names and dates to memorize. "Biography has a special appeal for students because they frequently come to care about a person while learning about him or her" ⁴. This allows for the student to question what this historical figure was like. Very often, in studying history, students are not able to look at the characteristics that make up an important figure. By studying biographies, students will get to know their figure in a more personal way thus allowing them to feel more of a connection with the person which will then help students retain information learned. My intention is to individualize each student's focus of study by trying to give him or her something to connect to with the president the student will be studying. Harvey and Goudvis state that "readers naturally bring their prior knowledge and experience to reading, but they comprehend better when they think about the connections they make between the text, their lives, and the larger world." ⁵ For young students, a connection that they make with a president such as being an only child, being sickly, or coming from a poor family may indeed enhance their learning. "Another appeal of reading biographies is that students learn about the times of individuals while learning about individuals" ⁶. Although students may struggle with understanding historical situations and the importance of dates and times, they understand stories about people and this sense of connection will help them by allowing them to put themselves in the characters' places and asking what would I do or how would I feel in this situation. After students have read a biography about a president, the next step will be to read a fictionalized account of the time that president served and/or lived. "Students can use the details in these stories to gain a deep understanding of the circumstances of these time periods." ⁷ Students will also have the added benefit of sharing the stories of the many presidents that they have studied who have lived during the specific time that the story takes place. "Reading historical fiction provides students with a vicarious experience for places and people they could otherwise never know. Often, they are able to see history through a child's point of view and identify with their emotions." ⁸ After

researching a president, students will be grouped by the time period that their presidents lived in to read an historical fiction account of an event that took place during that time. "Good historical fiction creates an emotional connection between children of today and their historical counterparts." ⁹

Unit Overview

This unit will last for approximately 8 weeks. The first week will consist of an introduction to the genre of biography as well as a whole group introduction to biographies with a study of a president. The class will listen to a biography of the president as well as be introduced to a profile of the president on PebbleGo.com which is a website many students will be using for research. A graphic organizer will be introduced and a rubric will be created with students so students are aware of what is expected in their final products. During the first week introduction, the teacher will also model with help from students how to choose important and interesting facts to be included in the graphic organizer. Students will also be made aware of the chronological order of biographies and be introduced to using a time line. A time line can also be made for the class to use as a whole noting the lives of the presidents as well as interesting and important events of the times. It will be interesting for students to begin to see what figures lived around the same time and what events they lived through. Students will be expected to:

Read a biography/website on an appropriate reading level.

Extract appropriate and significant information from text.

Use a graphic organizer to record appropriate/significant information about their president.

Place key events in the life of their president in chronological order.

Interpret and apply information about the lives of presidents by reading and asking questions.

Weeks 2 and 3 will be the time when students will be researching their presidents and recording important information onto their graphic organizers. According to their level of independence and/or reading level, students will be working with websites and biographies independently or with teacher assistance. Key questions that students will be asked to contemplate during research are:

What are the characteristics of a biography?

How does asking questions help me to locate information?

How does using a graphic organizer to take notes help me interact with information successfully?

Which events in a person's life are significant or influential?

During week 3 students will also be introduced to what the research paper will look like and some students may begin writing first drafts. During this time the teacher will review the different stages of writing that students will be completing in weeks 4 and 5.

Weeks 4 and 5 will be our time to write our research papers. Students will begin with first drafts and will work through the stages of the writing process including editing and revising with an emphasis on peer conferences as well as teacher conferences in order to get the piece ready for publishing.

Once our pieces have been published, each student will present his or her president to the class. It would be great if there could be an evening performance as well for families. For this presentation, other areas of instruction could be brought in such as art where students may create a poster for their president.

The remaining weeks left in the unit would focus on literature circles where students would be grouped based on time period of their president to read an historical fiction book that takes place when the group's presidents served and/or lived. As an extension students could be paired up and challenged to produce a fictional narrative that incorporates both presidents including conversations and events that might have happened in their lives based on what they know about their figures and the time that they lived

LESSONS

PART 1 - RESEARCHING BIOGRAPHIES

WEEK 1 - INTRODUCTION TO BIOGRAPHIES AND RESEARCH

1. Ask students if they know what a biography is and what sort of things they think they would learn about a person from a biography. (A biography is a non-fiction account of a person's life through which you would learn when the person was born and died, about the person's education and family and the important achievements as well as obstacles that made the person famous). Have students define biography. Ask students if they know where they can find biographies. (on-line and in the biography section of the library)

Tell students that, using Presidents as a topic, they will be introduced to the research process using on-line and written resources. They will locate information and take notes about a person from information that they find on-line and in a written biography.

2. Brainstorm with students what important events they might look up (birth, death, education, early years, etc.).

3. Pass out the biography research guide and discuss what type of information may be found in each category.

4. Teacher will model researching and filling out the background information on the worksheet for George Washington or Barack Obama.

Teacher will choose one entry and read from the source and have students tell which information we should write down. Discuss and model putting things in your own words and using phrases rather than sentences on the worksheet.

5. Brainstorm information to be including in a rubric or introduce a teacher-created rubric to the students and discuss what the expectations of this project are.

Students will be assigned a president. After reviewing the research guide and rubric, they will come up with a list of questions that they hope to be able to answer about their president.

WEEKS 2-3 (may take a shorter or longer time depending on class)

1. Using the computer lab and your classroom or school library, have each student find his or her president on-line and check out a biography of the president. *See list of websites attached. Also, it is important that teacher select biographies at the appropriate level prior to starting this unit.
2. Use the sample research guide for George Washington to model for students how each item of the rubric applies to the research guide.
3. Teacher will model finding information both on-line and in written form. Review finding information and then putting information in your own words.
4. Ask students to read or skim their biographies, focusing on the questions that were generated during Session 1 about the selected person. They will then put the information they find into the appropriate categories and start a rough draft.
5. When research guides are complete, students will be paired up to share their research guides and give each other feedback and suggestions for improvement or information that is missing or confusing. Teacher will also be meeting and working with students to review research guides and help with any information that students are struggling with.

WEEKS 4-5 (may take a shorter or longer time depending on class)

1. Students will use the information in their research guide to write an essay about their president. Review with students the parts of an expository essay and what is expected, referring back to the rubric.
2. Once finished, again pair students for feedback and suggestions. Teacher will also be meeting with students to review drafts and provide feedback.

CLASS PRESENTATIONS

Students will present their essays to the class as well as parents. Each student will be required to write down one fact about each president which will help students stay focused during presentations.

Biography Research Guide

| My President: _____ | |
|---|---|
| Notes (do not have to be complete sentences, put information into your own words) | Sentences Write complete sentences using the information from your notes. |
| Hook/Intro _____ _____ _____ _____ | |
| Birth/Childhood Notes (family, education) - - - - | _____ _____ _____ _____ |
| Adult Life Notes (marriage, children, jobs, etc.) - - - - | _____ _____ _____ _____ |

| | |
|--|----------------------------------|
| Important Accomplishments - - - - | _____ _____ _____ _____ |
| Interesting Facts - - - - | _____ _____ _____ _____ |
| Late Life (date/place/cause of death, if appropriate) - - - - | _____ _____ _____ _____ |
| Conclusion _____ _____ _____ | |

Research Report: Biography

| CATEGORY | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
|---|--|---|---|---|
| Quality of Information | Information clearly relates to the main topic and includes at least 3 details and/or examples. | Information clearly relates to the main topic and provides 1-2 details and/or examples. | Information clearly relates to the main topic. No details and/or examples are given. | Information has little or nothing to do with the main topic. |
| Sentence Structure | All sentences are complete sentences. There are no fragments or run-on sentences. | There are 1-2 sentences that are fragments or run-on sentences. | There are 3-4 sentences that are fragments or run-on sentences. | There are 5 or more sentences that are fragments or run-on sentences. |
| Grammar, Spelling, and Punctuation | No grammar, spelling, or punctuation errors. | 1-2 grammar, spelling, or punctuation errors. | 3-4 grammar, spelling, or punctuation errors. | 5 or more grammar, spelling, or punctuation errors. |
| Graphic Organizer | Graphic organizer or outline has been completed with all areas filled in and is organized and clear. | Graphic organizer or outline is organized and useful but not all areas are filled in. | Graphic organizer or outline is disorganized and hard to read. | Graphic organizer or outline has not been attempted. |
| Internet Use | Successfully uses suggested internet links to find information and navigates within these sites easily without assistance. | Able to use suggested internet links to find information and navigates within these sites with little assistance. | Needs some assistance or supervision to use suggested internet links and/or to navigate within these sites. | Needs constant assistance or supervision to use suggested internet links and/or to navigate within these sites. |
| Sources | Two sources are clearly documented. | One source is clearly documented. | Sources are not clearly documented. | Sources are not documented. |

PART 2 - CONNECTING THROUGH HISTORICAL FICTION

After students finish with their research projects, teacher will group students according to when presidents lived for a historical fiction book study. Students will be grouped by those presidents who lived during a specific time period. Some suggestions are: Colonial American times, the Revolutionary War, The Civil War, Western Expansion, the Depression, World War II, The Suffrage Movement, and The Civil Rights Movement.

*See list of Historical Fiction Novels that can be used.

DAY 1 INTRODUCTION TO HISTORICAL FICTION

Ask students the difference between fiction and non-fiction and ask if they know what historical fiction is. (Historical Fiction is a story that is made up but is written in a specific time period or during an historical event.) Stress to students that in historical fiction, setting is very important. The author is writing about a particular time in history and the information in the book is accurate for that time period. The plot of the story and the characters are not necessarily real although they could have been in that time period. An historical fiction book may contain real characters (such as presidents) and made-up characters such as the main character who is telling the story. Historical fiction may also contain real and fictional events, for example a war going on that really happened and a trip the fictional main character is taking. The important thing about historical fiction is that the fictional characters, settings and plot events must be written as if they could have happened in that time period. For example, an historical fiction story that took place in the early 1800s could not have the characters driving cars because cars that not been invented yet.

Ask students why we may want to read historical fiction instead of just reading a history book or nonfiction book such as the biographies that we just finished. Have them turn and talk with a neighbor about what is different when reading an historical fiction book. Ask students for feedback. Think aloud to students that I like historical fiction because it helps me understand how people lived during a certain time period. When I read historical fiction, I feel like I make a connection with the character and it seems to bring the past alive. Create an anchor chart for historical fiction highlighting that historical fiction: 1. describes a real historical setting, 2. includes characters that lived or could have lived during that time, and 3 has events that did occur or could have occurred.

DAY 2 MODEL READING HISTORICAL FICTION

Teacher will begin to read an historical novel called *George Washington's Socks* by Elvira Woodruff. Refer back to the anchor chart for historical fiction and show how this book fits into the historical fiction category.

DAYS 3 -? (depending on class and books chosen) BOOK STUDY/LITERATURE CIRCLE GROUPS

Teacher will group students according to time periods and students will get to choose (as a group) which historical fiction book from their time period they will read. Students should be familiar with literature circle groups but may need a quick reminder of how literature circles work and the different roles within the group: Forecaster (shares predictions about the book), Journalist (reports the main events of the story), Detective (records questions and thoughts about the book), Archaeologist (makes connections to the story), Interpreter (identifies and gives the definition of words that may be interesting), Photographer (captures one of the scenes in a picture), Tour Guide (guides the conversation about the book asking questions like "would you like to have the main character as your friend?"), Teacher (highlights interesting passages from the story that can teach significant elements of good reading or writing). These groups will run mostly according to the same format with the exception that they will also be focusing on the historical relevance of the book in connection with the president that they studied. The overriding guiding questions that each group will be thinking about are:

How are the characters' lives affected by the time in which they live?

What new knowledge did you gain about the time period from reading this book?

How did the president you studied fit into this time period?

How are the characters' lives and the time period different from your life and the time that you are living in?

Reading List

Anderson, Carl. *How's It Going?: A Practical Guide to Confering with Student Writers* . Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2000. Print.

Calkins, Lucy. *The Art of Teaching Writing* . Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1986. Print.

Chick, Kay A. "Fostering Student Collaboration through the Use of Historical Picture Books." *Social Studies*Jul/Aug2006, Vol. 97 Issue 4, p152-157.

Fertig, Gary. "Using Biography to Help Young Learners Understand the Causes of Historical Change and Continuity." *Social Studies*Jul/Aug2008, Vol. 99 Issue 4, p147-154.

Harvey, Stephanie and Anne Goudvis. *Strategies That Work* , Stenhouse Publishers, 2000.

Kellaher, Karen. *Report Writing* . Jefferson City, MO.: Scholastic Professional, 2002. Print.

Moore, Sharon Arthur. "Biography and poetry in the classroom." *Reading Teacher*Dec90, Vol. 44 Issue 4, p334-335.

Mosle, Sara. "What Should Children Read?" *The New York Times*: 22 Nov. 2012

Otis Hurst, Carol. "Personalizing History." *Teaching Pre K-8*Aug/Sep2001, Vol. 32 Issue 1, p106.

Robb, Laura. *Teaching Reading in Social Studies, Science, and Math* . New York: Scholastic Professional, 2003. Print.

Rycik, Mary Taylor. "The Return of Historical Fiction." *Reading Teacher*Oct2009, Vol. 63 Issue 2, p163-166.

Swartz, Elizabeth. "Life Stories." *Teaching Pre K-8*Feb2004, Vol. 34 Issue 5, p75-76.

Truax, Megan. "Terrific Teaching Tips: Reading Historical Texts: Comprehension Through Strategies and Extension." *Illinois Reading Council Journal*Fall2010, Vol. 38 Issue 4, p47-52.

Wood, Chip. *Yardsticks: Children in the Classroom, Ages 4-14 : A Resource for Parents and Teachers* . Greenfield, MA: Northeast Foundation for Children, 1997. Print.

Internet Sources

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

<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

<http://www.pebblego.com>. This site has biographies, as well as other information, that is easy to navigate and written in kid friendly language. Information also has an audio and video component that can be useful for students. This site does have a fee associated with it.

<http://whitehouse.gov>. This site has information about the office of president as well as information on each president.

<http://www.americanpresidents.org/>. This site has CSPAN's series of "Life Portraits" of each president.

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/article-gallery/presidents-bios/>

Student Reading List

Bradley, Kimberly Brubaker. *The President's Daughter* . New York: Yearling, [2006], c2004.

Kudlinski, Kathleen V. *Pearl Harbor is Burning: A Story of World War II* . New York: Viking, 1991.

McKissack, Patricia. *A Friendship for Today* . New York: Scholastic, 2007.

Paterson, Katherine. *Bread and Roses Too* . New York: Clarion, 2006.

Peck, Richard. *A long way from Chicago* . New York: Dial Books, 1998.

Peck, Richard. *The River Between Us* . New York: Puffin Books, 2003.

Rinaldi, Ann. *The Secret of Sarah Revere* . Orlando: Harcourt, 1995.

Wiles, Deborah. *Freedom Summer* . New York: Aladdin, 2001.

Book Series

Adler, David A. The Picture Biography Series (A Picture Book of _____)

Gutman, Dan. The Baseball Card Adventure Series

LeSourd, Nancy. The Liberty Letter Series

Osborne, Mary Pope. The Magic Tree House Series – these stories are a mix of science fiction and historical fiction.

Woodruff, Elvira. The Time Travel Adventure Series

Dear America Series by various authors

Little House Series by various authors

The American Girl Doll Series by various authors (Meet ____ : An American Girl)

Appendix: Implementing District Standards

Having completed this unit, students will have worked to achieve the following Connecticut's Common Core of Learning Program Goals for Language Arts:

Common Core Standards – Literacy/Reading

- Ask and answer questions to demonstrate understanding of a text
- Determine the main idea of a text; recount the key details and explain how they support the main idea
- Describe the relationship between a series of historical events

Common Core Standards – Literacy/Writing

- Write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas and information clearly
- Introduce a topic and group related information together
- Develop the topic with facts, definitions, and details
- Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, descriptive details, and clear event sequences
- Establish a situation and introduce a narrator and/or characters; organize an event sequence that unfolds naturally
- With guidance and support from adults, produce writing in which the development and organization are appropriate to task and purpose
- With guidance and support from peers and adults, develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, and editing
- With guidance and support from adults, use technology to produce and publish writing (using keyboarding

skills) as well as to interact and collaborate with others

- Conduct short research projects that build knowledge about a topic
- Recall information from experiences or gather information from print and digital sources; take brief notes on sources and sort evidence into provided categories

Common Core Standards - Literacy/Speaking and Listening

- Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on *grade 3 topics and texts* , building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly
- Ask questions to check understanding of information presented, stay on topic, and link their comments to the remarks of others
- Explain their own ideas and understanding in light of the discussion.
- Determine the main ideas and supporting details of a text read aloud or information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

Notes

1. Calkins, Lucy. *The Art of Teaching Writing*, 432 .
 2. Mosle, Sara. " *What Should Children Read?* "
 3. Calkins, Lucy. *The Art of Teaching Writing*, 432 .
 4. Moore, Sharon Arthur. "Biography and poetry in the classroom," 334-335.
 5. Harvey and Goudvis. *Strategies That Work* , 11.
 6. Moore, Sharon Arthur. "Biography and poetry in the classroom," 334-335.
 7. Truax, Megan. "Terrific Teaching Tips: Reading Historical Texts: Comprehension Through Strategies and Extension," 47-52.
 8. Rycik, Mary Taylor. "The Return of Historical Fiction," 163-166.
 9. Rycik, Mary Taylor. "The Return of Historical Fiction," 163-166.
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