



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
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Introduction

On Nov. 25, 2012, Sara Mosle published a column in *The New York Times* that posed an important question: "What Should Children Read?" Her answer: more good nonfiction.

Mosle was responding to the debate surrounding the Common Core State Standards now adopted by most states to guide K-12 curricula. Among many other changes, these standards emphasize nonfiction ("reading for information") over more traditional kinds of literary texts (poems, plays, prose fiction). But reading is a complicated art. One reads to find the answers to questions, to entertain oneself, to communicate ideas, to move emotions – neither varieties of reading matter nor the kinds of skills required to read are divisible into neat categories. In order to clarify (or perhaps complicate) the relation between "literature" and "information," this seminar explored many kinds of texts and a variety of ways of approaching them.

Specifically, we explored the relationship between fiction and nonfiction, and between literary writing and other kinds. This opened many large theoretical questions, such as how should we define "literature"? What are the purposes of reading? We considered whether some kinds of texts offer transparent containers for information, and how students can learn to be appreciative and critical readers of all kinds of writing. How can nonfiction be literary (or at least well-written)? What kinds of "information" do we get from reading fiction? We thought hard about subjectivity and objectivity, the value of the self, and the problems and opportunities introduced by personal perspective.

We pursued these large questions by reading many different kinds of writing around a number of common subjects that were chosen to provoke reflection. Taking Mosle's cue, we read a wide variety of accomplished non-fiction, on topics ranging from science (Michael Pollan on food, Stephen Jay Gould on evolution) to social science (Anne Fadiman on cultures of medicine, Douglas Rae on the post-industrial American city) to history (Doris Kearns Goodwin on Lincoln, Diane McWhorter on Birmingham in the Civil Rights era). We also read a diverse selection of fiction, from poems (Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market," speeches from Shakespeare) to short stories (Jhumpa Lahiri, "Interpreter of Maladies") to satire (Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal"). Most often, we paired a literary text with an informational one: Is one background reading for the other? We also took a special interest in the kinds of literature and information that are staged in performance, which we explored through documentary film (Spike Lee, *4 Little Girls*) and historical fiction (Steven Spielberg, *Lincoln* and *Amistad*). Throughout the seminar, the relation between history and literature proved especially close, and yet especially vexed. Reading a number of theoretical assessments of the practice of "historicism" as a literary critical method allowed us to pose new questions: In what ways are historical texts themselves "mere" fictions? How can we understand literary texts to open "true" histories?

As we explored the most abstract and heady versions of these questions, we kept in mind the practical

considerations that would shape pedagogical practice. An important component of the seminar was our consideration of the relation between students' reading and their own writing. Often an analytical paper is the response to reading literary fiction. But it is also useful to imagine the reverse: creative writing as a response to informational reading. We also explored the usefulness of more direct models – reading poetry to write poetry; reading prose nonfiction in order to write it.

The curriculum units that emerged from the seminar balance strategic thinking about the pedagogical value of fiction and nonfiction with concrete plans for using both kinds of writing in the K-12 classroom.

Some units capitalized on the potential of this subject for the youngest students. Breanna Evans, "World Zoo: Parent-Child Interaction," proposes the interaction of fiction with fact as a way to bring families into their kindergarteners' educations from the first. Learning about different family structures in the animal kingdom – from seahorse daddies to elephant foster parents – allows children to make associations between these families and their own. Christine Elmore, "Blame It on Little Red Riding Hood," explores the powers of fact and fiction through a consideration of wolves. Even first-graders know that wolves are "big" and "bad." Looking at the development of this trope in fairy tales, and measuring its longevity against facts about wolves in the wild, expose students to the ways in which fiction can influence our view of reality. Mary Elmore, "Being the Change," brings history and fiction together to teach her students about two inspirational champions of nonviolence: Martin Luther King, Jr., and Mohandas K. Gandhi. Intersecting with both Black History Month and International Day, this unit helps students to imagine how they might embody their own dreams.

For students in the middle years, Joan Marie Meehan, "Real People, Real Lives: Biographies of Presidents," also uses biography to inspire an interest in history and a hope for the future. Presidential lives offer narratives with which students can identify, especially when they are paired with historical fiction set in the period. Similarly, Medea Lamberti-Sanchez, "Stop the Presses: The Newsies Strike out against Child Labor," introduces students to the history of turn-of-the-century labor relations and policy questions about children in the workplace through song and dance and film. William Wagoner, "Game of Heroes: Exploring Myth through Interactive (Non) Fiction," uses Joseph Campbell's paradigms to examine the nature of myth, both historical and fictional. Myth lies between history and fiction, and yet also above either one: How is Perseus like Martin Luther King, Jr.? To answer this question, and others like it, students create their own interactive game in which a hero confronts a set of adventures. To explain the body's most mysterious organ, Christina Ferraro, "The Brain Manual," introduces facts about brain physiology and brain functioning, exemplified by a story about a young boy whose brain has (as she says) "differences." The combination of literature and information in this unit can empower students to use their brains more effectively.

The possibilities for combining literature with information on the high school level are numerous. Molly Seely – in "The First World War: How, When and Why?" – plans a heavily historical and contextual reading of *All Quiet on the Western Front*. In this unit, students extend their understanding of the novel by studying the political history surrounding it, as well as pieces of propaganda such as radio spots or recruitment posters. Marialuisa Sapienza, "The Difficult Task I Face: Adulthood," also provides students with rich historical and cultural context for a novel, *Under the Feet of Jesus*, by Helena Viramontes. The novel centers on the coming of age of a teenage girl in a family of migrant workers in California in the 1960s, and offers opportunities not only for literary analysis, but also for new historical understanding and self-examination. Kelly DeLuca, "Making Meaning: The Search for Identity through Family History," addresses the genre of memoir. Like myth, memoir is a complicated category of narrative: artful history that is nonetheless careful not to cross the line into fiction. Finally, Elizabeth Johnson – "Composition, Computers, and the Common Core" – goes to the heart of one of the new standards, developing a unit that will teach students not only how to read, but also how to

write, effective nonfiction.

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