



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
2014 Volume II: Exploring Community through Ethnographic Nonfiction, Fiction, and Film

Does Community Truly Bring Unity?

Curriculum Unit 14.02.11
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Rationale

During the New Teacher Orientation sessions with the New Haven Public School District, no one ever educates us teachers on the real issues we will encounter inside the schools. I entered my first day of teaching with excitement and a young passion for where my career would lead, but quickly realized I did not fit into the school I had been placed to work in. Why not? Because as the students entered the building, they spoke in a language I did not understand, they said, "Word to D Lover" over and over again, and greeted each other in ways that spoke loudly to those who knew what those signs and handshakes meant. I quickly faced the reality that these students are a part of the New Horizons community, which is divided into many small communities stemming from where they live within New Haven, and I did not fit into any of it. As I immersed myself my first year, so I could not only feel a part of the community, but to understand my students, I lost four students to murder and two to life-time jail sentences. My second year, I began questioning and challenging my students, but now in my fourth year, I feel more knowledgeable and able to ask my students to question and critique their communities further.

I teach under-credited and overage "juniors" and "seniors" at New Horizons School for Higher Achievement in New Haven, Connecticut. My students have been placed in our alternative high school for reasons of truancy, criminal records (court-ordered students), childcare issues, and serious behavior issues. Most of them live in poverty-ridden neighborhoods and find school to be their only "safe-haven," but fall way below their reading/writing grade levels, so schoolwork is difficult and frustrating. My job is to teach the New Haven junior and senior curriculum at an appropriate level, so none of my students feel over- or under-challenged, which is quite difficult when I have a class of fifteen students and reading/writing levels vary from "grade 2" through "post-high school." Another huge challenge is their truancy issues. In my class of fifteen I may only see the same three students every other day, so the units and lessons I plan cannot span over a couple days because I will only be forced to play "catch-up" each day with the students who walk into the classroom after three days of being absent.

The students of New Horizons unconsciously place a high value on community. They do not realize how much emphasis they place on the importance of their neighborhood community, school community, family community, and the communities they build for themselves. Currently, I have tried to focus on social issues (racism, sexism, homophobia, etc.), which ultimately examined how communities are viewed and treated by

people who do not identify with those communities. However, to better address my students' social (which become personal) issues, I need to understand how they interact with the people around them and what value they place on specific communities. Through my observations thus far, I recognize a need to examine the small communities with which they identify (i.e. New Horizons community and "neighborhood" communities (Hill, Ville, Jungle, etc.)). These topics will be both easy and challenging. The knowledge about these topics is already in the experiences of my students, but constructing a class for them to critique these structures will be challenging.

In order to effectively bring these issues into the classroom for deep examination, I must introduce material to my students where they can begin to research the structures of communities. Texts, such as, *Do the Right Thing* by Spike Lee, *Basketball Wives* on VH1, *Juicy* by Notorious BIG, and *The Tanning of America: How Hip-Hop Created a Culture That Rewrote the Rules of the New Economy* by Steve Stoute all highlight some of the issues I want my students to begin to question and criticize.

The overarching question for the unit will be does community truly bring unity? In order to answer this question, my students will analyze different texts, debate, pose questions, give out surveys, do self-reflection, and research their community. The end result of this unit will be an ethnographic representation of the communities my students identify with. They will be asked to enter into the community of their choice: their neighborhood, their church, their workplace, etc. and take photos. The photos they capture will tell a story. My hope is my students will conduct this research based on facts and allow the images they capture to tell a story all on its own.

Unit Breakdown

Objectives

1. To enhance reading comprehension and close reading skills through various texts
 - a. Students will be given multiple texts to read and comprehend. They will close read each text, in order to identify the qualities of a community
2. To create foundational knowledge of a community
 - a. Students will learn the basics of community and be able to identify the basic needs of a community
3. To foster self-reflection through journaling and independent research of community
 - a. Students will be asked to journal daily and research their own communities, so they can self-reflect on their learning
4. To make meaningful connections between different communities presented
 - a. Though students will be presented with vastly different communities, they will need to find commonalities between them all
5. To strengthen reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills
 - a. Through reading, writing, speaking, and listening, students will express themselves and learn from others
6. To promote evaluative and analytical skills
 - a. Students will have to evaluate and analyze different communities presented in different texts
7. To conduct independent and group research/projects/presentations
 - a. Students will work independently to research their own communities and also in groups to create false communities and evaluate real communities

8. To create foundational knowledge of ethnography
 - a. Students will conduct an ethnographic study of a community through pictures and surveys
9. To strengthen social interactions and communication skills among students in a variety of settings
 - a. Students will be forced to work in groups and have classroom discussions, which will not permit independent, silent work

Overview

This unit will span over the course of a marking period, which is about 45 days of teaching.

The first week of the unit will be more teacher-directed. The students will take notes on community and receive the foundational information they need in order to begin comprehending the texts.

The next six weeks of the unit will be heavily focused on the four core texts of the unit. Students will analyze the texts and engage in various assignments (listed under the "Activities" heading) that will strengthen the texts messages.

The final two weeks of the unit will be dedicated to the final project (listed under the "Final Project" heading). Students will have to conduct research outside of the classroom, while completing other components of the project inside the classroom.

Why This Unit Is Needed

Currently, my students do not question their community or even recognize their place within their community. This unit will directly inform them about communities, how they are created, structured, treated, and separated from other communities. This unit will ask my students to identify qualities of a community, in general, and of specific communities. They will also be asked to identify the communities they are a part of and their role within their community. This unit is not to judge their communities, but to allow students to self-reflect on the purpose of their community and their individual roles within those communities.

This unit will also allow my students to experience, in text form, different communities, which will force them to make comparisons. Their daily journaling will be a space for them to evaluate these communities and possibly question the successes and failures of each community.

Texts and Their Purpose

The texts chosen are very specific to my students. These are texts that will keep them engaged. It is very important to choose age-appropriate texts, which will keep all students interested, otherwise the objective of the unit will not be reached.

Spike Lee's Do the Right Thing

This text questions how communities create separation and also allow for the possibility of union. The fictional film takes place in Bed-Stuy, Brooklyn, NY. Sal's Pizzeria, an Italian owned business, is in the heart of a neighborhood that experiences racial tension between the African Americans, Puerto Rican Americans,

Jamaican Americans, Korean Americans, and Italian Americans. Much like New Haven, the communities in Lee's movie live in close proximity, but have hatred for one another. New Haven is broken into many different "neighborhoods" which are, sometimes, only street lengths long and sits next to a rivaling "neighborhood." Fair Haven, The Jungle, and parts of The Hill are all considered "Puerto Rican and Mexican" (which is used by many students to include all Spanish-speaking people of New Haven. The Ville, The Island, and parts of The Hill are considered "Black." While blacks from The Ville "beef" (argue) with blacks from The Hill, there is also tension between the blacks and the Spanish-speaking community. Within the Spanish-speaking community, there are tensions between the Puerto Ricans and the Mexicans. Lee's movie, regardless of its publication date, will allow my students to relate to the issues they face each day in their neighborhoods and question the effectiveness of the communities set in place.

VH1's Basketball Wives

This VH1 reality television show documents the community of women who are dating, married to, divorced from, or have children by famous NBA basketball players. The show glamorizes the wealth of these women, while capturing all their drama. These women are bound by a common thread, but bring each other down as often as possible. Much like the girls at New Horizons, there is a lack of womanhood. The women in both the reality TV show and New Horizons allow men to come between them. The men linked to the women in this community generally tend to be absent from the drama, even when they are the root of it. This community questions the idea of unity and how to create unity when members who are not a part of the community want to watch the drama play out.

Notorious BIG's Juicy

This 1994 hip-hop song highlights the idea that all black people come up from struggle in the hood. My students often relate to his lyrics, even though originally sang when my students were very young, because of his childhood struggle. He speaks about living in public housing and not being able to receive Christmas or birthday gifts because of how poor his single mother was. However, the stereotype this song presents for others is that all black people live or have lived this way. The goal is for my students to analyze this song and question the separation it may cause between those who can relate to the lyrics and those who point to the lyrics to understand a whole group of people.

Steve Stoute's The Tanning of America

This documentary, *The Tanning of America: How Hip-Hop Created a Culture That Rewrote the Rules of the New Economy*, draws a line from 1520 Sedgwick Avenue in the Bronx, directly to 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, where President Obama serves as the first black president. This documentary highlights the ups and downs of a community and how together they made life-changing historical moments happen in America. This text focuses on a large community that grew from racism and segregation into togetherness and equality. Similarly, New Haven is a community that has tried and continues to try to come together to unite all people and move forward.

Activities

Journaling/Self-Reflection

At the beginning of the unit, students will be asked to journal their thoughts on what communities mean, how they are created, and which communities they are a part of. Throughout the unit, they will have to journal their realizations about communities and how they have changed their opinions about the functions of communities or not and why. Through journaling, they will make assumptions, ask questions, and make conclusions about their own communities. Their journals will help them document their learning and growth. It will also help them decide on which community they want to focus on for their final project.

The journals will also serve the purpose of asking students to privately reflect upon their own communities. This is not an activity that should take place outloud because students might feel vulnerable discussing their private living situations. This activity is meant solely for self-reflections, which is a powerful activity.

Classroom Discussion

Throughout the unit, students will engage in classroom discussions rooted in questions posed from the films. They will be required to ask questions, participate in answer questions, and work in small groups and whole groups. After classroom discussions, students will journal any points made they wish to document for their personal reflection.

Survey

The class will create a survey they will conduct with an array of people about community. They will be in charge of developing the questions on the survey and who to hand it out to. Their survey will serve as an assessment of people's community awareness, which will help them journal and develop an idea for their final projects.

Debate

While the staff at our school have a passion for alternative education and possess the tools necessary to succeed in our goal of reengaging these students in an institution they often find unwelcoming, there are many people who are against alternative education. I want to bring both sides of this issue into the classroom and allow my students to determine the positives and negatives of alternative education. Their school is a community they are a part of, and my goal for them is to conduct their own research and reflect on their own lives and experiences to make conclusions. The students will gather the necessary information they need to have a debate about whether the alternative education community encourages or discourages unity.

Teaching Material

The foundation of this unit will be based on my research of communities. Through multiple resources, I created the following questions, which will be used in class to "dissect" each community. These questions will serve as a way for students to keep track of each community and easily compare the different communities

they are introduced to in the variety of texts that will be used. These questions also serve as a way to force students to close read each text. These questions should be kept in a portfolio.

Community Name:

What is the role/goal of the community?:

Who are the members in the community?:

How does the community communicate?:

What are the institutions within the community?:

What skills/resources do individuals in the community have?:

What are the needs of the community?:

What are the smaller teams/groups within the community?

Final Project

Ethnographic Study

Students will be asked to choose one community they identify with and research it. They will be asked to enter into that community and take photographs of everything they see. They will also be asked to interview some people from that community. They will each, individually, bring back their research to our classroom and present their research. It will be the job of a fellow student to write up an analysis of one of their peer's communities. This task will help students question and analyze communities and decide whether or not the community fosters unity or not.

Appendix

Implementing Common Core State Standards

The following are the standards this unit targets:

RI.11-12.1. Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.

RI.11-12.2. Determine two or more themes or central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to produce a complex account; provide an objective summary of the text.

This unit asks students to use textual evidence to support whether or not the community depicted fosters unity. They must also cite the main themes of the text, in order to fully understand the text and engage in discussion about the evidence.

W.11-12.1. Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

W.11-12.2. Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

This unit asks students to determine whether or not the communities presented in the various texts promote unity. They will have to use the evidence presented to make a case for their claim. Furthermore, they will engage in a classroom debate, which they will need to be equipped with evidence that supports a strong claim.

W.11-12.7. Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question) or solve a problem; narrow or broaden the inquiry when appropriate; synthesize multiple sources on the subject, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.

Throughout this unit, students will be asked to journal, pose and answer in-depth questions about the texts, research a community, and write an analysis of a community, in which they only have photographs and interviews from.

S&L.11-12.1. Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 11-12 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

Throughout the unit, students will engage in many discussions about the different texts presented in small groups and whole groups.

S&L.11-12.3. Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric, assessing the stance, premises, links among ideas, word choice, points of emphasis, and tone used.

S&L.11-12.3. Present information, findings, and supporting evidence, conveying a clear and distinct perspective, such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning, alternative or opposing perspectives are addressed, and the organization, development, substance, and style are appropriate to purpose, audience, and a range of formal and informal tasks.

Students will be asked to participate in a formal classroom debate about the topic of alternative education. They must respect their peers and speak in a way that is clear to their audience. They will have to acknowledge opposing arguments and argue their opinions based on evidence they have gathered.

L.11-12.1. Demonstrate command of the conventions of Standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking.

L.11-12.2. Demonstrate command of the conventions of Standard English capitalization, punctuation, and spelling when writing.

Students will have to practice writing and speaking in Standard English in their journals, responses, papers,

classroom discussions, and debate.

Teacher Bibliography

Vincanne Adams, *Markets of Sorrow, Labors of Faith: New Orleans in the Wake of Katrina* (Duke University Press, 2013)

Adams' ethnographic study of New Orleans after Katrina explores the victims of the natural disaster as well as the private institutions that capitalized on this disaster.

Elijah Anderson, *The Iconic Ghetto* (ANNALS, AAPSS, 642, 2012)

Anderson describes his account of being a black man in New Haven, Connecticut. He describes different instances when he was the focus of prejudices.

Kathryn Dudley, *Debt and Dispossession: Farm Loss in America's Heartland* (University of Chicago Press, 2000)

Dudley's ethnographic study of a small town, which feels the blow of the farm crisis in the 1980s, eloquently analyzes social trauma. Dudley interviews natives from the small Minnesota town.

Kathryn Dudley, *The End of the Line: Lost Jobs, New Lives in Postindustrial America* (University of Chicago Press, 1994)

Dudley does an ethnographic study of Kenosha, Wisconsin after the closing of the Chrysler plant. Dudley explores how the small town survived after a huge traumatic crisis.

Katherine Newman, et al., *Rampage: The Social Roots of School Shootings* (Basic, 2004)

Newman challenges what American society thinks about school shootings and reveals all the signs in place that we overlook.

Toni Morrison, *Home* (Knopf, 2012)

Morrison's novel follows a Korean War veteran, Frank Money, as he remembers violent memories from his past. Frank Money seeks out to find his sister, Cee, who he left behind.

Thornton Wilder, *Our Town* (Harper Classics, [1938] 2003)

Wilder's three-act play takes place in Grover's Corner, New Hampshire. It depicts the life of classic, small-town families.

Student Reading List Bibliography

Elijah Anderson, *The Iconic Ghetto* (ANNALS, AAPSS, 642, 2012)

Anderson describes his account of being a black man in New Haven, Connecticut.

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Classroom Use Bibliography

Do the Right Thing. Dir. Spike Lee. Perf. Danny Aiello, Ossie Davis, and Ruby Dee. 40 Acres & A Mule Filmworks, 1989. DVD.

Lee's movie takes place in BedStuy, New York. The small neighborhood is populated by Italians, Puerto Ricans, Blacks, Jamaicans, and Asians, who all have to find a way to coexist in the 80s.

Notorious B.I.G. Juicy. Notorious B.I.G. Poke of Trackmasters & Sean "Puffy" Combs, 1994. Cassette.

Notorious B.I.G.'s song tells the story of the artist's life and how he made it to stardom. His lyrics are stereotypical of any rapper who had a hard life growing up in the ghetto on welfare.

Scott-Young, Mona, prod. "Basketball Wives." *Basketball Wives*. VH1. MonaMi Entertainment, New York City, New York, n.d. Television.

Basketball Wives follows a group of women around who have one thing in common—their men are basketball players. These women have to go through the ups and downs with, not only their men, but each other.

Stoute, Steve, and Mim Eichler. Rivas. *The Tanning of America: How Hip-hop Created a Culture That Rewrote the Rules of the New Economy*. New York: Gotham, 2011. Print.

Stoute's documentary provides evidence to support the claim that hip-hop put President Obama in office. The documentary starts at the beginning of hip-hop and travels all the way to present time.

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