



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1982 Volume II: Autobiography

Who Do You Think You Are?

Curriculum Unit 82.02.02
by Bill Coden

There is no remembered past; there is no predictable future. My students seem to be mired in an everlasting “now,” a time period which acknowledges neither yesterday nor tomorrow.

This “now” is a dangerous place to be because it fosters a sense of disconnectedness which is reinforced by the traditional middle grades set-up of fragmented time and space. Rather than flow, learning must take place in rigid time-slots with little possibility or opportunity for meaningful follow-up activities.

“Now” also encourages an act-react behavior pattern to emerge. Situations must be met head-on. Little or no time or opportunity for reflection is possible. “What do I do *now* ?” replaces “How did I get to this point? Where do I go from here?” This pattern affects teachers as well as students.

“Now” excludes the possibility of unexplored potentialities. “Now” always is and always will be. Aspirations are unenvisioned.

I intend to develop *Who Do You Think You Are?* as a Humanities/Language Arts course suitable for seventh- and eighth-grade students in an arts-magnet middle school. The philosophy of the school encourages teachers in the arts and the academics to make subject-area crossovers whenever possible; teachers, as well as students, are encouraged to stretch and to grow. (As my concluding comments will indicate, I have since taught this unit in several different school settings.) The unit, of course, must be adaptable for students with varying reading, writing, and social skills. While the unit will explore one subject—the self—in depth, the experiences and activities will provide the breadth which Van de Bogart feels is so essential in a Humanities course. It is not an objective of the unit to produce a student “who knows more and more about less and less.”

1

Who Do You Think You Are? will allow my students to remember, discuss, and record significant events and people in their lives. They will discover the reality of the past. Remembering, a solitary activity, will be more than reminiscence; reasons and patterns will be sought. Discussions will be both small- and large-group. Recording will be either written, taped, or pictorial (as indicated by lesson plan).

My students will come to recognize and realize their uniqueness as individuals and as group members. *Who Do You Think You Are?* will be part of our everyday life—not a unit featured for a few weeks and then forgotten. “Group” therefore refers to our classroom as well as to our families. Theater games stressing trust, cooperation, and a sense of community are an integral part of the unit; the good which can come from these

activities goes beyond the unit.

Students will come to recognize and attempt to project the future as a result of knowledge gained through unit activities. Work on cause-effect relationships and creative problem-solving will help us achieve this goal. The dreams and aspirations of Lorraine Hansberry and Anne Frank will be read, discussed, and compared to our own. “Tomorrow’s News Today” will allow us to videotape our probable—and our fantastic—futures.

The development of facility in reading and writing is the heart of the unit. Excerpts from autobiographies will be read and discussed. More importantly, the excerpts will serve as models for student-written autobiographies. Identifying the voice of a writer is an important facet of this objective. The process of identification will help students find and maintain their own voices in their writings. Revision of writings will be part of the process from the beginning. Revision—or reconceiving—will be done because everything has possibilities. A higher level of success or insight may be achieved by approaching a reading or writing assignment from a different angle. Helping students understand that a problem may have a number of possible solutions is important.

Specifically, each activity in the unit will be composed of:

I. *Lead-up.* A theater exercise will usually precede a reading assignment. While the development of a sense of community and cooperation will always underlie the choice of a theater game, the exercise should have a direct connection to the theme of the selections which will be read and discussed. “Personal Scenes” will allow small groups of students to share turning points, choose one memory to be dramatized by the small group, and presented to the class. Turning points may be highly dramatic or just slightly out of the ordinary. These ideas will be emphasized during the reading and discussion.

Theater games are valuable tools because concentration is of paramount importance in each activity. The exercises lend themselves nicely to this unit because there must be a progression: a beginning, a middle, and an end to each activity—a yesterday, a today, and a tomorrow.

Because I would want to start the unit at the beginning of the school year, I’d take certain precautionary measures.

The introduction of theater games into the classroom would lay the groundwork for building a sense of community, trust, and cooperation. We will begin finding out who we are from the first day of school. Warm-up exercises (alphabetizing ourselves by first name or street, arranging ourselves numerically by birth date or shoe size) will help us to focus on ourselves individually and as group members and will introduce the concepts of revising and reconceiving.

If a part of an activity proves painful for a student, he/she should be allowed to opt out of the exercise or to reconceive an approach to the problem. If “Personal Scenes” was indeed too personal, perhaps the student could be encouraged to make up a memory to be shared or to fuse together parts of several memories. Such flexibility will help in the building of self-confidence and responsibility.

II. *Literature.* Selections from a number of autobiographies will be read and discussed in class. The readings will be used as springboards for student writings. Specific readings will prompt specific points of discussion. The areas mentioned later in the unit are suggestions; there may be topics you feel would be of more importance to your students. Pursue them!

All discussions of the literature we read must deal with the phenomenon of voice. Such discussions should elicit the individuality of the writer under scrutiny. How does he/she sound? What is he/she telling—or not telling—us? Excerpts will be analyzed for both word selection and overall structure. The analysis should not, I feel, overshadow the thematic discussion though it is invaluable to the writing the students will be doing. A fine line has to be drawn. As with revision, I'll stress the approach rather than the mechanics.

The literature (and subsequent writing assignments) will be grouped in broad categories. I've drawn the categories from student interests as well as needs I've recognized. The categories include:

- A. Early memories
- B. Superstitions/Family wisdom
- C. School
- D. First love
- E. Responsibility
- F. Tragedy
- G. Turning points (rites of passage)
- H. Trends
- I. Place

J. Future

Autobiographical books, excerpts, poems, and recordings would be available for students to use in “free” time in school and at home. These materials would be selected for pleasure as well as for information. Books which have been excerpted will be available in the classroom library; a file of biographical and autobiographical articles from sports and entertainment magazines will be developed. It is important that students become familiar and comfortable with the idea—as well as the reality—of autobiography.

III. *Writing* . Writing assignments would range from the broad (“Make a list of ten words which describe you.”) to the more specific (“What qualities distinguish you from your friends? your enemies? your family?”) The progression that is important in the structure of theater games is as important in the structure of the writing assignments.

In order to circumvent the “That’s too personal!” response, the writing activities at the beginning of the unit emphasize the general. A questionnaire format is reasonably non-threatening to students bred on filling in the blanks. Before long, it will become easier to introduce “thought questions” into the format. These “thought questions” can serve as the basis of expanded writing assignments. Lengthy reliance on the questionnaire

format would be self-defeating and deadly.

As stated above, writing assignments will grow out of the discussion of specific autobiographical readings. In order to stress the importance of *voice* in autobiography, an experiment might be conducted with students. “How would you—as Frederick Douglass or Zora Hurston or Anne Frank—describe the theater game we played earlier?” Such an activity, early in the unit, would give students a solid base for finding and reproducing their own voices in their autobiographical writings. We might also do a theater activity called “Whose Story Is It?” Students would pair up, each in turn share an incident, choose one, and then both relate the same incident to the class which would then try to determine whose story it was. The storytellers are coached to keep the story line accurate but make the story their own—embellish it, use their own voices and gestures. The goal is to adapt rather than to trick.

Though I’ve belabored the point, the sense of community and cooperation being established will give students freedom to explore, express, and share themselves. Risk-taking will become less threatening. Environment must play a tremendous part in the depth, breadth, and honesty of students’ response to autobiographical writing assignments. Though the teacher is the immediate audience for the writings, the value of the process ultimately lies with the students.

IV. *Follow-up* . I have chosen to make the Humanities especially important in the follow-up activities. In addition to providing further opportunities for self-expression and self-exploration, they will reinforce the theme of “connectedness” which underlies the unit. I’ll make as many crossovers with the academic and arts disciplines as I can, to satisfy myself, my students, and my school.

Creative problem-solving and values clarification activities will lead to rudimentary discussions of philosophy. Approaching problems from many angles will again be stressed. The creation of time-lines, neighborhood murals, and floor plans will lead to investigations in architecture. We’ll recognize our separate neighborhoods as parts of a whole. What makes our neighborhood or home or room special to us? Family traditions, superstitions and record-holders will be gathered through student-conducted interviews. Perhaps adults will be recognized as sources of information as well as authority. The design, as well as the execution, of the interviews will come from the students and will touch on a number of subject areas.

Self-portraits and family portraits will be juxtaposed with a study of fine art portraiture. Snapshots will be brought in from home and used in a number of ways. Snapshots capture one moment in time. What happened just before and right after the camera clicked? The stories would be based on fact with details to be supplied or re- created. The past is not always readily available to a writer (Frederick Douglass, Maxine Hong Kingston); it must be imagined and created.

Students will discover their voices in many media. The opportunities for making connections are virtually limitless and extremely important.

A tangible end-product of *Who Do You Think You Are?* will be an autobiographical booklet, two-fold in nature: a collection of personal writings and observations and an anthology culled from the former which could be shared with parents and other classes. The Humanities activities, which can’t be included in the booklets, are vital to the production of the writings.

Obviously teacher-awareness of students’ environments and capabilities would influence the nature of the activities chosen for use. A working-file of ideas and observations would be helpful in forming and re-forming activities suitable to particular classrooms.

I wrote and first taught *Who Do You Think You Are?* in 1982; parts, as well as expansions, of the unit have been central to my teaching ever since. In 1982 I was teaching in an arts-magnet middle school which had changed some of the traditional rigidity we're all used to: periods were lengthened and/or combined so teachers spent more time with students each day; teachers were encouraged to work with each other across, as well as within, guidelines for the arts and academics. These factors contributed to the successful teaching of the unit, as written. There was the time and the continuity necessary to complete the activities. Currently I am teaching in a program for talented and gifted public school students. While seventh-grade students meet for a long period of class time, they meet as this group only once a week.

It's been necessary to make alterations in the unit, most of which are dictated by time-structure. What were formerly lead-up activities are now done as follow-ups in the afternoon; greater emphasis is now placed on writing and on including a wider variety of literature; arts activities have been abbreviated. For the most part, each "lesson" is begun and completed in one weekly class session. While this is less than ideal and certainly different from what I'd intended, the writings produced and thoughts expressed continue to encourage my belief in the value of autobiography in the classroom. New material continues to present itself, as I continue to become more aware of autobiography, the many forms it can take, and the richness it can bring into the classroom. Over the course of the years, some ideas were scrapped; they were too dated or too difficult or too facile. Many more ideas, however, were generated and added to the unit.

I have participated in two other Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute seminars on autobiography and have written two more units. While I believe each unit, written to respond to a specific need or to explore a certain approach, could be taught on its own, I am most comfortable combining elements from each.

I Am. . . (1988, vol. 3, 56-59) centered on journal-writing as a way of remembering. The goal of the writing is to gain an understanding of our lives and a recognition of our self-worth. When we help students choose form, voice, subject, and audience, we give them responsibility and ownership for their writing. ² Though the majority of the readings in this unit are excerpts from longer autobiographical works, different sources for reading and writing activities were recognized and used: autobiographical poems and fictions, photographs, and slave narratives. Discussion, rather than the reading journal described in the unit, proved to be of more value as a lead-in to personal journal writing.

Remember (1990, vol. 1, 21-31) is an attempt to make our reading and writing program more representative of our school system's cultural diversity. Rethinking the practice of the two previous units afforded me the chance to strike a finer balance between the universal and the unique. The unit offers an overview of the history of Hispanic-American literature as well as Chicano literature, a literature of self-search and social protest. The unit focuses on the work of Lorna Dee Cervantes, a Chicana poet whose voice speaks of her roles as Chicana, poet, and scribe. Writing suggestions given in the lesson plans emphasize poetry but could easily be treated in prose.

The following overview contains the selections and suggestions written in 1982; they have been reordered so that they move from the general to the specific; from the non-threatening to the more intimate; from the universal to the unique, as perceived by my students and me. The unit, whole or in part, has been taught to remedial, average, and gifted and talented seventh- and eighth-graders.

The lead-up activities progress from "fun" warm-up whole-group games to more thought-provoking small-group and individual activities. Difficulties students might experience with themes and in reading ability are fairly evenly-spread. Though the opportunity to teach specific skills (adding details, sequencing) and forms

(script, song lyrics) is there, the reordering reflects, more than anything else, my desire to have students become more at ease with the act of writing.

A GENERAL OVERVIEW

I. *Early Memory*

- A. Lead-up: Thinking Back (stream-of-consciousness)
- B. Literature: "Knoxville, Tennessee"—Nikki Giovanni
The Autobiography of Malcolm X , pp. 1-2
A Mass For The Dead , pp. 26-27
To Be Young, Gifted, and Black , pp. 48-50
- C. Writing: select an early memory; expand, add details
- D. Follow-up: reconstruct the place of your memory
Nikki Giovanni filmstrip

II. *School*

- A. Lead-up: Ask/Reject: a problem-solving activity in which a player tries to elicit the cooperation of his/her partner in granting a wish; the partner has been instructed to reject the request unless he/she is fully persuaded. Approaches to the problem must be reconceived.
- B. Literature: *Manchild In The Promised Land* , pp. 154-57;
Narrative of The Life of Frederick Douglass , pp.33-46;
I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings , pp. 142-56;
Down These Mean Streets , pp. 69-74
- C. Writing: directed memory (chronological)
- D. Follow-up: special teacher—Who? Why? ideal teacher

III. *Family/Family Wisdom*

- A. Lead-up: Composite questionnaire: What do you do for good luck? How do you avoid bad luck?
- B. Literature: *Black Boy* , pp. 16-21
To Be Young, Gifted, and Black , p. 53;
I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings , pp. 21-27;
I Love Myself When I Am Laughing . . . , pp. 28-32;
**"Lies," p. 106
- C. Writing: interview: family superstitions, traditions; transcribe
- D. Follow-up: create a good luck charm

IV. *Place*

- A. Lead-up: Blueprint (current home, early home)
- B. Literature: *Notes Of A Native Son* , pp. 47-48;
The Story Of My Life , pp. 20-21;
*"Apartment House," p. 39;
**"Vacant House," p. 167
- C. Writing: guided tour of blueprint (written; videotaped)
- D. Follow-up: Neighborhood mural

V. *Love*

- A. Lead-up: Anonymous Valentine
- B. Literature: *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings* , pp. 8-11
I Love Myself When I Am Laughing . . . , pp. 70-74

*"Valentine," p. 124

**"The Picnic," p. 62

C. Writing: write lyrics to a love song; listen to—hear message of—love songs.

D. Follow-up: Love Day: students bring to class and share inexpensive tokens of love they've been given; love poems are read and discussed; symbols of affection—the heart, Cupid—are discussed.

VI. *Responsibility*

A. Lead-up: Airport: this is a theater game which stresses giving and receiving directions; accepting and giving over responsibility. See Bananas for a full explanation.

B. Literature: *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings* , pp. 142-56

A Choice of Weapons , pp. 220-22

C. Writing: recreate an incident when you were "in charge"

D. Follow-up: Thank You Note

VII. *Turning Points*

A. Lead-up: Personal scenes

B. Literature: *Black Boy* , pp. 9-13

Autobiography of Malcolm X , pp. 21-22

A Choice of Weapons , pp. 11-12

I Love Myself When I Am Laughing . . . , pp. 40-45

The Story Of My Life , pp. 32-35

**"Growing Up," p. 40

C. Writing: "I used to be. . ."

D. Follow-up: Time Line—visual points to be expanded in writing

VIII. *Future*

A. Lead-up: Best Thing About Me (Now)

B. Literature: *To Be Young, Gifted, and Black* , pp. 259-63

Anne Frank: The Diary Of A Young Girl , pp. 80, 233-37.

Manchild In The Promised Land, pp. 426-27

*"Dreams," p. 129

C. Writing: Tomorrow's News Today (script for news program)

D. Follow-up: Success Symbols (share, discuss)

(figure available in print form)

(figure available in print form)

Sample Lesson Plan: EARLY MEMORIES

Lead-up . Try to recall the first thing you can actually remember happening—not something you were told happened. Record the memory on paper; continue writing, *letting the mind wander* across time for five minutes. (Music, “Jupiter Symphony,” is helpful.)

Literature . “Knoxville, Tennessee,” by Nikki Giovanni. What *senses* are appealed to? How is Ms. Giovanni able to sound like a child? What is important to this child?

Autobiography of Malcolm X , pp. 1-2. Even before birth, Malcolm X seemed destined to live a life of drama and violence. What elements of drama are present in this short selection? What can we guess about this person by looking at the *words* (especially verbs) he has chosen to use?

A Mass for the Dead , pp. 26-27. The author presents himself as a character in a story. Why is the incident so important to him? How does he give examples of cause-effect relationships?

To Be Young, Gifted, and Black , pp. 48-50. What gives Lorraine an early sense of her uniqueness? What makes *you* unique? In what ways are the memories of Lorraine and Nikki similar? Where do you wish a GIANT STEP would lead?

Writing . Select one of the memories from the list you worked on earlier. Expand it: give it a beginning, a middle, and an end. Feel free to invent details which would enrich the story. (The group could later discuss the criteria used in making choices: drama, happiness, tragedy, appeal to the senses, etc.)

Follow-up . Try to reconstruct the *place* of the memory you chose to write about. Can you see the place in your mind’s eye? Using paints, inks, crayons—any of our art materials—give a representation of the place. (The activity could be done in conjunction with an art teacher. Group discussion could center around what was most important about the place: color, size, students’ feelings, etc. The representations should be displayed in the classroom.)

Sample Lesson Plan: PLACE

Lead up . Using simple materials (paper, pencil, or marker), draw floor plans or blueprints for the last two houses or apartments you’ve lived in. Set up your own measurement scale.

Literature. *Notes of a Native Son* , pp. 47-48. Baldwin creates a character out of a place. What is a “casual” face? In this case, why is the casualness deceptive? Describe the character’s life. Describe the author’s tone of voice.

The Story of My Life , pp. 20-21. What senses are appealed to in this selection? Why do you think the garden—rather than the house—is so lovingly described? Reread the short selection. What tone of voice do you hear?

“Apartment House,” by Gerald Rafferty. What attitude or tone is conveyed in the poem? How would you describe an apartment house?

“Vacant House,” by Jeanne De L. Bonnette. A scene is conveyed by concentrating on what is missing or lacking. What do you feel is the most important element of “home?”

Writing . Look at the blueprints or floor plans you drew earlier. Please write a commentary for a walking tour through one house or apartment. Describe the rooms, furniture, the places you used to study, play, day-dream, hide, sleep, etc. Include memories as they occur to you.

Follow-up . (Divide class into neighborhood groupings; aim for groups of 3-7 people.) Using markers, crayons, and large poster paper, draw a mural of things, places, and people in your neighborhood. Include things which you feel make your neighborhood unique. You might want to include a detailed street map as part of your mural. (The murals should be displayed in the classroom. Materials on architecture and a map of the city are useful in this activity.)

Sample Lesson Plan: THE FUTURE

Lead-up . Today you’ll have the chance to be in the spotlight and to see others in the same situation. One by one each of you should step before the video camera, say your name, and briefly tell the best thing about you now.

Sometimes it’s a shock to see yourself on a video playback. Let’s talk about how you felt when you saw and heard yourself and others. Were you yourself? What makes you yourself?

Literature . *To Be Young, Gifted, and Black* , pp. 259-63. Lorraine felt she was in the process of living her dream. How was she able to do it? What vision of the future did Lorraine hold? In which section did she come close to the oratorical skills of Frederick Douglass? Why is oratory important in this section?

The Diary of a Young Girl , pp. 80, 233-37. The early dream of the future sounds like a longing for the ordinary. Why is this dream so important to Anne?

In the latter section, Anne feels she’s being more realistic. Do you agree? Why? Why not? What does the future now center on?

Anne steps outside herself in the last section. How does she see herself? Try doing the same activity, using yourself as the subject.

Manchild in the Promised Land, pp. 426-27. What influence did fear have on Claude’s vision of the future? How does he separate “challenge” from “fear?”

“. . . That’s all that matters, that a cat does what he wants to do.” Do you agree or disagree?

“Dreams,” by Langston Hughes. Using symbolic language, how would you define a *dream* ? How would you define the *absence* of a dream?

Writing . We’re going to work on a video project—the creation of a news show of the future with ourselves as the newsmakers. Scripts will have to be written: news stories will be based on what we’ve shared with and learned about each other; commercials should center around our interests. Groups will be needed to coordinate writing, building scenery, delivering news, and taping the show. Use the skills you developed in the family interviews for this news show. (News items can be taped “on location.” Students can costume themselves as they might appear in the future. Students may exchange roles. A lot of coordination and cooperation is needed in this activity.)

Follow-up . Bring in success symbols—things which illustrate your achievements, things you’ve worked hard to attain, things which are important to you. We’ll share and discuss them.

NOTES

1. Doris Van de Bogart, *Introduction to the Humanities* , 5.

2. Frank Thomas, *How to Write the Story of Your Life* , 5-6.

* in Reflections on a Gift of Watermelon Pickle.

** in Some Haystacks Don’t Even Have Any Needle.

TEACHER BIBLIOGRAPHY

Allison, Linda. *Blood and Guts* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1976.) Discusses elements of the human body. Suggests experiments and projects which familiarize students with their bodies; good tie-in with theater games.

Bananas . Center for Theater Techniques in Education, 800 Dixwell Avenue, New Haven, Connecticut. A rich source of multi-arts activities based on theater activities and practices. I've found it an invaluable source of ideas.

Burns, Marilyn. *I Am Not A Short Adult!* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1977.) Deals with aspects of childhood: school, legal rights, money, work, TV, the body and its language. Emphasis on making the most of yourself.

Canfield, Jack and Harold C. Wells. *100 Ways to Enhance Self-concept in the Classroom* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1976.) A collection of activities (writing, art, discussion) centering on building a positive self-image and a caring environment.

DeMille, Richard. *Put Your Mother on the Ceiling* (New York: Penguin Books, 1977.) Imagination games designed to increase children's belief in their own effectiveness. Especially successful with fifth- and sixth-graders.

Dunning, Stephen, Edward Leuders and Hugh Smith. *Reflections on a Gift of Watermelon Pickle* (Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1966.)

——— *Some Haystacks Don't Even Have Any Needle* (Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1969. Both of Dunning's books are fine collections of thematically arranged poems which appeal especially to fifth- through eighth-graders.

Jaffe, Charlotte. *Discovery Unlimited: Thinking Through the Humanities* (Phoenix, Arizona: THINK INK Publications, 1981.) Activities using critical thinking skills as an approach to the areas of art, literature, music, and architecture. Sections on music and literature are very good. The unique angles of approach to "creative" areas tie in with the concept of "re-conceiving" in the unit.

Thomas, Frank P. *How To Write The Story of Your Life* (Cincinnati: Writers' Digest Books, 1984.) Written by a teacher and journalist, this book offers many research/writing suggestions. The chance to review your life and gain new insights is stressed.

Van de Bogert, Doris. *Introduction to the Humanities* (New York: Barnes and Noble, Inc., 1968.) Ideas about incorporating the Humanities into your curriculum. Helpful.

Weitzman, David. *My Backyard History Book* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1975.) The main contention of the book—learning about the past begins at home—is vital to the unit. Many fine activities and projects are suggested.

<https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu>

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

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