



## **His Story/Her Story/Your Story**

Curriculum Unit 82.02.08  
by Gail Staggers

This unit will explore the use of biography as vehicle for helping students gain a working and personal knowledge of black history.

Students will gain an historical perspective about black life (they will be able to use biographies and key in on significant events in history), they will gain a flavor for the particular time the biography was written in, and hopefully be able to make comparisons of events that have happened in their lives with events that happened in the lives of other people.

At the beginning of the course students will begin keeping a journal in which they must make daily entries. Once they begin reading autobiographies they can observe the style of various authors, and perhaps try writing in a different voice themselves by paying attention to the sentence structure and vocabulary used by others.

By studying biographies and autobiographies students will also gain some knowledge about black achievements, the particular social conditions and problems of blacks (segregation, poverty, and discrimination), and learn various political ideologies.

The autobiographies to be read will come from various periods in history. Included will be slave narratives, one of the oldest forms of black literature in this country, and also many selections by modern authors.

This unit will be for a heterogeneous group of high school students, who will be at different grade levels, however, it would be an excellent tool for students who need basic skills work. As the class reads the various selections together the student is working on his own writing skills in their journal.

### ***STRUCTURE***

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This unit will be run twice. One of the courses will be a year long course with more of a focus on the individual journal to be written. At the end of the end of the year students would be able to view the results of their journal. For this class the journal would be more of a homework assignment rather than an in-class-time assignment.

The other course would be a block class which would run for eight weeks, and meet five days a week for three hours each day. The threehour class would be scheduled in such a way as to allow students to use in-class time more effectively. There would be the time and space available for reading in class, writing (making entries in their journals), and class time lectures; it also allows for the use of guest speakers and class field trips.

Because of the nature of the student body and the utilization of staff it is necessary for the two sessions not only to be run differently, but also to be geared for different kinds of students.

The block class, especially because of time boundaries, would be ideal for a group of basic skills students. By basic skills students I mean those students who are able to read either on grade level or perhaps two to three years below grade level. The materials used in the unit will be especially geared towards those students.

The year long course would be for students who read on and above grade level. These students will be working on skills such as analytic writing, reading for comprehension etc.

## ***TEACHING STRATEGIES***

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For this particular unit the student will use two books which will become the primary texts for the course. These books will be supplemented periodically with other materials.

The text to be used is the *Afro-American in United States History*, by Benjamin DaSilva, Milton Finkelstein, and Arlene Loshin. This is a fairly comprehensive study of the United States and of the Black American. The text deals with slavery, black contributions in the various wars that the United States has been involved in, the contributions of Black Americans in science, culture, politics and economics. This book is purposely designed for a student with basic skills needs and has short chapters that are easily read and understood.

Along with the text the class will use an anthology of autobiographies by Black Americans. This anthology, *Growing Up Black in America*, by Jay David, relates the childhood experiences of nineteen Black Americans from the story of Issac Jefferson, one of the slaves of Thomas Jefferson, to the autobiographies of Dick Gregory and Malcolm X.

By using such an anthology the students will hopefully be able to make varied entries in their own journals. Again the autobiographies are short enough so that the whole class can read all of them, it will also allow the students to choose one of the nineteen autobiographies to read in depth. If funds permit most of the nineteen autobiographies will be available for classroom use.

A few selections from *Growing Up Black* have been coupled with chapters from the history text to explain in more detail how the autobiographies and the history can be coordinated together. The selections are: *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* , *Up From Slavery* , the *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, *His Eye is on the Sparrow* , and *The Long Shadow Little Rock* .

The black history and United States history issues these selections span are the 19th century slavery, emancipation, and reconstruction, and the Plessy vs. Ferguson case. For the 20th century the issues are: black migration, race riots, the depression, the civil rights movement, and school desegregation.

In the basic text, *Growing Up Black*, chapter two, “The Nineteenth Century,” is the story of children who lived through slavery, emancipation, and reconstruction.

The *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* gives a vivid account of the cruelties of the ‘peculiar institution’ from the viewpoint of Douglass as a young boy on a Maryland plantation and a city slave.

This autobiography will be read with the text unit entitled the “Evils of Bondage”, and the chapters “Plantation Life for the Slave”. These chapters explain the social, economic, and political functions of slavery. Douglass’ account gives a personal view of the evils of slavery.

There are additional chapters in the history text which coincide with the autobiography of Frederick Douglass. For example, the chapters on the slave revolts and the runaway slaves parallel Douglass’ escape to freedom, and his reasons for running away were very well explained.

Many students are perplexed as to how slaves could endure the kind punishment they did, and why they didn’t run away or revolt. Douglass’ account gives them some of the answers about how slaves coped within the institution of slavery.

Student reactions to the evils of slavery are an excellent means to coordinate the information from the text, the autobiographies, and the journal. Their reactions to slavery are an excellent motivational tool to get them to write about information they have covered. A way to do this would be to have them make a journal entry which would begin: You are a slave and have just seen someone you care for beaten unmercifully . . . write about what you saw and how you feel, and how you can help the other person and yourself . . .

*Up From Slavery* is the account of Booker T. Washington’s life. Washington recounts his youth as a slave and his life during the reconstruction of the south, and gives a good description of what the fears and aspirations of the newly freed slave was. He describes his school life, and the experience of his first days in school. This autobiography would be read with the chapters in the text on emancipation and the reconstruction.

Even though students would be reading excerpts from the book *Up From Slavery*, they could read even more of the book and tie this in with the other chapters of the history text, specifically the chapters on “Jim Crow”, and “Separate But Equal”. In the chapter “Separate But Equal” there is a specific reference to Booker T. Washington and his autobiography would be an excellent addition at this point.

*Up From Slavery* leads to the possibility of many journal entries. Students can be asked to write about their first day in school, or to reflect on what it means to be separate and equal at the same time and is that possible.

*His Eye is on The Sparrow* is the autobiography of Ethel Waters’ childhood in a Philadelphia slum. This autobiography has a correlation to the black migration and urbanization of blacks in the beginning of the twentieth century.

This excerpt would be read while studying the chapters on urban life, the early 1900’s and the 1920’s, and what black life was like during that period.

For journal entries from *His Eye is on the Sparrow* the student can be write how environment can serve as influence on people’s lives.

The early childhood of Malcolm X from the *Autobiography of Malcolm X* tells the hardships of growing black

during the depression of the 1930's. The shame and embarrassment of being on ' relief' is dealt with. This has a direct relationship to the chapters on the depression and the hardships that engulfed the nation during the depression.

The memory of being on relief and the destruction of his family was one of the reasons why Malcolm X was so angry as an adult. Students can make journal entries on shameful or embarrassing moments they might have had as children, that they learned to deal with.

Daisy Bates's *Long Shadow of Little Rock* , which handles school desegregation, is a shocking account of being the first person to desegregate a school. This chapter ties in directly with the text chapters on the civil rights movement. Many students are not able understand how the civil rights movement worked as a non-violent action. Reading this excerpt with the history text helps them understand the personal sacrifice for the betterment of the group. There are several possibilities for journal entries from the excerpts of the *Long Shadow of Little Rock*. The student might assume the position of being the first person to do something historic for example, desegregate a school or a lunch counter, or a bus.

Since the book and the anthology can be coordinated chronologically by placing autobiographies with particular time periods in history, the organization of the unit becomes relatively simple; however, some of the chapters will require other outside readings. For example, the text book has a unit in which the topics of life in colonial America and the westward expansion are mentioned. In *Growing Up Black* there is no mention of the westward movement; however, this can be remedied by using other supplemental autobiographies: in this particular case the biography of Jim Beckwourth, a mountain man and trapper in the early northwest can be used. This biography is *Mountain Man, Indian Chief: the Life and Adventures of Jim Beckwourth* . Another biography would be *Edward Rose, Negro Trail Blazer* by Harold W. Felton.

This same procedure of using supplemental biographies and autobiographies can be done throughout the course. The use of the supplemental items also allows the students to be exposed to a variety of black people and events in history.

The journal entries mentioned previously are an important part of the course. These entries will allow the student to relate their daily experiences much the same way the daily experiences of the autobiographies are related.

Some students have problems with thinking about what they could begin writing in their journals, and for that reason they can be encouraged to make entries by completing values statements and then rewriting the passage. These values statements would begin with: I was surprised that . . . , I' m glad that . . . . I decided that . . . , I discovered that . . . . , I reflected that . . . . etc.

A list of the values statements may be used daily or just one statement may be chosen per day.

After students have become accustomed to making daily entries they would then be ready to look at the styles of some of the autobiographies they have read and try to use a voice similar to the author.

Another method of encouraging students to write about themselves and incorporate the information they are getting in history is to have them write a family history. A family history could help students who are reluctant to write about themselves, write about themselves indirectly.

There are many ways to begin writing a family history. One is to make a family tree and from the information

on the tree build around it. Another would be to do several family interviews to find out what information can be found. Once the information is collected it can be compiled and written. A family history would also make an interesting entry in their journals.

Students can be encouraged to use various audio-visual aids to do writing. When they do a family history and do interviews they should be encouraged to use a tape recorder if it is available. In this way they would not miss any information and get some practice in transcribing the interviews, and doing rewriting so that they have not missed any important information.

After the family histories students might use a historical event and write a script about how the event in history might have happened, or what might have happened to a person in their family who might have been involved in a similar incident. Students could script out the event, dramatize it, and use the video tape recorder to film the skit.

Knowing that their skit would be on film would be an incentive to get students to write a script with the intention of their skit being filmed.

Many of the narratives on Black Americans were told to someone. During slavery this was because slaves for the most part did not read or write, and later because people felt unable to write for themselves. In following this kind of oral tradition students would tell each other their stories and they could write not their own, but another person's story.

## ***CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES***

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Objective: To help personalize what goes on in the classroom the following activities are designed to help students assimilate and use the information they learn in the course.

### **Activity #1**

It is January 1, 1863, President Lincoln has signed the Emancipation Proclamation. You are Frederick Douglass. Write a letter to a friend telling him how you are feeling about this. (Use the voice of Douglass/ sound like him).

### **Activity #2**

The Civil War is over, the period called Reconstruction has begun. Read the chapter from Booker T. Washington's *Up From Slavery* on his school experience. Now write your own experience as if you were a newly freed slave going to school for the first time. You might want to write this as if making an entry in a diary.

September 3, 1867

Today was my first day in school. I didn't

have alot of clothes to wear but . . .

### **Activity # 3**

Interview someone in your family. If you have a tape recorder or access to one use it. You need to write questions to get yourself started in this activity.

### **Activity # 4**

Write a skit using one of the autobiographies that has been read. Each student will have read all of the autobiographies from the nineteenth century, choose one of those stories and write a skit in teams. Each skit will be copied, and all members of the class will read each skit. The class will then choose a skit they can do. When the skit is completed and rehearsed, it will be videotaped.

### **Activity # 5**

Oral History—Use a tape recorder and talk to people in your family ask them for family recipes, family remedies, favorite family stories, etc.

### **Activity # 6**

Diagram a family tree and find as much data as possible include birthdates, dates of marriages, deaths, places of birth and deaths. (see example next page)

*(figure available in print form)*

## **Lesson Plans**

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This course is designed for three hours a day for eight weeks. The normal class process will include a reading component, a writing section, and a discussion or activity section. It is always necessary to continue the format of the three elements mentioned above. Repetition of the format helps organize the time for the class, and also helps the student know what to expect when so that he can fulfill the course requirements.

The following are methods of organizing and presenting materials to the class:

### **Plan 1**

#### **Objectives**

1. Help student understand the relationship of autobiography to US History.
2. To help students express themselves in writing.
3. To have students read the autobiographies of black Americans.
4. To help students find relationships between their lives and the lives of other people.

***Methods Read excerpts from the autobiographies of black Americans. The stories to be used are The Autobiography of Malcolm X, written by Alex Haley, Nigger by Dick Gregory, and The Long***

***Shadow of Little Rock by Daisy Bates.***

After reading selections from the early years of these black Americans, students will write a childhood experience they had. Before students begin to write, the idea of autobiography and childhood experience should be discussed, keeping in mind that although everyone does not have the *same* experience, there is a relationship in the kind of experiences children have. The idea of similarities of childhood experiences can be begun by having them remember their first adventure, their first time losing somebody (death, getting lost in a strange place, losing a friend), the first time they realized that they were different from other people.

**Plan 2**

***Objectives***

1. Help students appreciate the black experience.
2. To help students see the relationship between black history and the autobiographies used in class.

***Methods Have students read the chapter on “The Coming of the Depression” in the US History text The Afro-American in U.S. History.***

***Discuss***

1. What was the depression.
2. What were the causes of the Great Depression.
3. How were black Americans hurt by the depression.
4. How relief programs were begun.

***Review Vocabulary poverty, production, depression, stocks, unemployment, relief***

***Write Have students write about what happened during the depression using the vocabulary and the information discussed and read in the text.***

**Plan 3**

***Objectives***

1. Help the students appreciate the black experience.
2. To help students see the relationship between black history and the autobiographies used in class.

**Methods** Have the students read excerpt from *Nigger* by Dick Gregory.

**Discuss How the depression is described by Dick Gregory as he saw things as a youngster. (the shame of the relief, the separation of his family, his hunger/ poverty, and his shame caused by his teacher)**

**Write Have students write in human terms what the depression was. They should use the papers from the day before (Plan 2) for factual information. This will help them use the facts and the human factor and hopefully have an understanding for both.**

## TEACHER BIBLIOGRAPHY

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Anderson, Marian. *My Lord What a Morning: An Autobiography* . New York: Viking Press, 1956.

Marian Anderson, famous concert singer and opera performer recalls her early life in Philadelphia and her career.

Angelou, Maya. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* . New York: Random House, 1969.

Angelou describes here her childhood in a small Arkansas town and in Saint Louis, and her high school years in San Francisco.

Ashe, Arthur. *Advantage Ashe* . As told to Clifford George Gewecke, Jr. New York: Coward/ McCann, 1967.

Focuses on the career of Ashe, beginning with his teenaged years in Richmond and Lynchburg, Virginia.

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Life of Charles Ball who was born a slave in 1858.

Brown, Henry Box. *Narrative of Henry Box Brown, Who Escaped from Slavery Enclosed in a Box 3 Feet Long and 2 Feet Wide* . Philadelphia: Rhistoric Publications, 1969.

Bates, Daisy. *The Long Shadow of Little Rock* . McKay, 1962.

The story of the black high school students who desegregated Central High School in Little Rock Arkansas in 1954.

Beckwourth, James T. *The Life and Adventures of Jim Beckwourth* . As dictated to T.D. Bonner. Harcourt Brace, 1968.

Jim Beckwourth was a mountain man and trapper in the early northwest. His autobiography is a combination of actual events and probably some tall tales also.

Brown, Claude. *Manchild in the Promised Land* . Macmillan, 1965.

Pictures the squalor and crime of Brown's early life in Harlem and in correctional institutions.



Bruce, H.C. *The New Man* . New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969.

Recollections of Henry Bruce as a slave and as a free man.

Butterfield, Stephen. *Black Autobiography in America*. University of Massachusetts Press, 1974.

Survey of black autobiographies from the slave narratives to the moderns.

Baldwin, James. *Notes of a Native Son* . Bantam, 1955.

Autobiography of Baldwin beginning with his boyhood in Harlem.

DaSilva, Benjamin, Finklestein, Milton. Loshin, Arlene. *The Afro American in United States History* . New York: Globe Book Company, 1972.

US History text on Blacks in the history.

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Anthology of the childhood experiences of nineteen black Americans.

David, Jay. Green, Catherine J. *Black Roots* . McCougall-Littel, 1976.

Anthology of autobiographical accounts written by twenty black Americans, some famous and some not so renowned.

Dennis, Ethel. *The Black People of America*. New Haven: Reader's Press, 1970.

A comprehensive black history text.

Equiano, Olaudah. *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African (1789)*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1969.

Narrative of the life of Equiano as a slave in Africa, his passage to America, and as a slave in America.

Felton, Harold W. *Edward Rose, Negro Trail Blazer* . Dodd, 1967.

Biography of Edward Rose, a black mountain man, hunter, guide, and interpreter in the southwest.

Flipper, Henry Osswain. *Negro Frontiersman: The Western Memoirs of Henry O. Flipper, First Negro Graduate of West Point*. El Paso: Texas Western College Press, 1963.

Memoirs written while Flipper served as a US Army Cavalry officer in the southwest from 1878 to 1882.

Franklin, John Hope. *From Slavery to Freedom* .

Comprehensive history of the black man in America from slavery to the civil rights movement of the 1960's.

Gregory, Dick. *Nigger: An Autobiography* . New York: Dutton, 1969.

Gregory recalls his early life including his civil rights activities.

Gibson, Althea. *I Always Wanted to Be Somebody* . New York: Harper and Bros., 1958.

World champion tennis player describes her career and her young years in South Carolina, Harlem, and Wilmington, Delaware.

Giovanni, Nikki. *Gemini* . Penguin, 1976.

Nikki Giovanni's collection of essays ranging from personal recollections of her grandmother, the birth of her son, and her reflections on race and revolution.

Johnson, James Weldon. *Black Manhattan* .

History of the negro in New York and the New York stage. Negro experience in the depression period.

Johnson, James Weldon. *Along This Way: The Autobiography of James Weldon Johnson* . New York: Viking Press, 1933.

Story of Johnson who was the secretary to the NAACP for fourteen years, he was a poet, lecturer, songwriter, lawyer, and teacher.

King, Martin Luther. *Stride Toward Freedom* . Harper and Row, 1958.

Autobiographical account of Dr. Martin Luther King and the Montgomery bus boycott.

Love, Nat. *The Life and Adventures of Nat Love*. New York: Arno Press, 1968.

Adventures of a railroad car worker which covers his life as a slave and later his experiences as a cowboy known as Deadwood Dick.

Lester, Julius. *To Be a Slave* . Dell, 1975.

A collection of writings by slaves and observers describing what life was like during slavery.

Malcolm X, with the assistance of Alex Haley. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* . New York: Gorge Press, 1965.

Tells the autobiography of Malcolm a famous religious and race leader assassinated in 1965.

Owens, Jesse, with Paul G. Neimark. *The Jesse Owens Story* , New York: Putnam'a, 1970.

A brief volume primarily for young readers, Owens recounts major events in his life.

Parks, Gordon. *A Choice of Weapons* . New York: Harper and Row, 1966.

Parks reveals his life through 1943.

Quarles, Benjamin. Sterling, Dorothy. *Lift Every Voice* . New York: Doubleday, 1965.

Biographical sketches of four black Americans: WEB DuBois, Mary Church Terrell, Booker T. Washington, and James Weldon Johnson.

Robeson, Paul. *Here I Stand*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1971.

Autobiography of Robeson with essays on racial and political issues.

Washington Booker T. *Up From Slavery*. Williamstown Mass. Corner House, 1971.

Autobiography of Washington, his boyhood in West Virginia, his education at Hampton Institute and his work at Tuskegee.

Washington, Mary Helen. *Black Eyed Susans: Classic Stories by and about Black Women*. Doubleday, 1975.

A collection of stories that explore conflicts and strengths of black women. Contains stories by Jean Wheeler Smith, Toni Morrison, Gwendolyn Brooks, Louise Meriweather, Toni Cade Bambara, Alice Walder, and Raule Marshall.

Waters, Ethel, with Charles Samuels. *His Eye is on the Sparrow*. New York: Pyramid Books, 1967.

The autobiography of the life of Ethel Waters.

Wells, Ida B. *Crusade for Justice: The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970.

Carries the life of Ida Wells through 1921. A noted civil rights worker and civic leader.

Wright, Richard. *Black Boy: A Record of Childhood and Youth*. New York: Harper and Row, 1966.

Famous fiction writer, poet, dramatist reflects on his life in Mississippi, Arkansas, and Memphis and his jobs and criminal activities.

## STUDENT READING LIST

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David, Jay. *Growing Up Black*.

David Jay. Greene, Catherine J. *Black Roots*.

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Washington, Mary Helen. *Black Eyed Susans: Classic Stories by and about Black Women*.

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