



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1988 Volume III: Autobiography in America

Everyone has a Story to Tell

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I believe that each of my students has something very meaningful to say to me. I teach in a middle school learning center and this is the setting in which I've come to the personal conclusion that these children are special, though not any different than those in the mainstream. It is important to me, as an educator, not to fall into that trap of misdiagnosis and stereotyping based on a previously stated label. Labels are supposed to help, not hinder a child's learning. "The label is designed to facilitate communication, legislation, and administration in serving the exceptional student."¹ However, the most important thing to remember about learning center pupils is that they are students, and like any other child needs to feel accepted and important.

What's different about learning center children in contrast to mainstream children is their test scores and their rate of retention. These are easy to work around: forget their test scores and let them set their own pace for learning. Too often a child is only accepted after he shows (teachers) that he can meet our set standards for him. Initially, I say forget setting any standards and simply do the accepting. After a foundation of acceptance has been laid, the learning can begin. This rule applies for regular education also, learning center students just tend to need a lot more of this strategy. "These youngsters often feel that they can never please the adult in the learning setting. Teachers should be aware that a child's anxious feelings indicate that he feels unable to perform perfectly. Therefore, the teacher should create an atmosphere in which the pressure to be perfect is greatly reduced."²

This unit is designed for four weeks of teaching which I suggest be done shortly after school starts in the fall. Although this material can be adapted for many classroom situations and all seasons, this unit can greatly enhance the remainder of the year's teaching since its focus is on some basic maintenance skills: reading, writing, and improving one's self-image. It is through the use of autobiographical tasks that these skills can interlock and thus become thematic. I stay away from the term autobiography at this point simply so not to intimidate any learners. I will pick up on that term later, after students are comfortable with what they are doing. I introduce each element separately (writing, reading, feeling) and when they are ready to be combined we can give it a general term, such as autobiography.

The first activity I do is a student interview. This questionnaire collects fundamental information which provides the teacher with a briefing of each child's experiential background. Since these do contain some pertinent information, I've found it helpful to keep these inventories in a classroom file for the rest of the year to use as an additional reference in getting to know each individual. It really is important to know, for example, which students have been to a zoo and which have not, and equally important, which students liked

it and which did not. child's experiential background may be affected by parental rejection, indifference, or overprotection, by frequent illness, by the use of a nonstandard dialect in the home, or by any number of other reasons." ³ For the teacher, especially in the learning center, these factors are of utmost importance in prescribing an education for each child.

This is the initial phase of autobiography, and when a student gives me this information, I can begin to know him. I want to know who my students are—I can be of much more help to them this way. However, at this point I don't tell my students the remarkability of what they are doing lest I might scare some of them off. They won't yet quite understand the nature of the task they are about to tackle: defining and expressing themselves! For now this is the sole purpose of their writing. I (the teacher) am their only audience. It is my job to foster productivity and creativity, not to form opinions.

I ask each of my students to get a spiral bound notebook which I keep for them. These become their journals and everyday for ten minutes I request that my students write in them. These are not graded and I do not place any arbitrary rules on journal writing—nor do I supply a set formula for writing" There is only personal technique to develop. "Ideally, journal entries should come into being spontaneously. The idea may come from a child's actual experience. Or it may come from in episode in which others take part. It may come with a beginning, a middle, and an end. Or it may come as a fragment of a whole ." ⁴ The important thing is that they (the students) write. Some will say "I can't," and in the beginning this may be true. If this is ever the case, I request that student to write about why he can't write...anything to get words on the page. One day at a time, it gets easier for them. The journals students keep from September through June are my proof of this"

Most kids will need help in getting started, so what I do is generate some thought by giving simple suggestions to write on. Here are some which have worked well for me in obtaining immediate responses:

- * a favorite toy
- * apologizing to somebody
- * an embarrassing moment
- * helping someone
- * being happy,sad, or angry
- * describing a place
- * best birthday ever
- * family members
- * having a pet
- * friendship
- * first crush
- * a family tradition
- * the future
- * school
- * most unlucky day
- * proudest moment
- * winning a contest
- * getting lost
- * being afraid
- * vacation

Another technique in getting kids to write is to have them react to a hypothetical question/situation. These often reveal a child's innate feelings and values. Here are some examples:

- * You wake up in the middle of the night to find your house is on fire. What do you do?
- * You get locked into the department store of your choice overnight. What store do you choose, and how do you spend the time?
- * You get to be the teacher for one day. Tell me what you might do.
- * You can have any one thing for Christmas. What is the item and why do you choose it?
- * You win one million dollars. How do you spend the money?
- * What would be a "perfect" day for you? * "Whom do you admire most? In what way does that person inspire you? What are that person's best qualities?" ⁵
- * Is there anybody you would like to trade lives with? Why?
- * "If you knew there would be a nuclear holocaust in one week, what would you do?" ⁶
- * "What was your most enjoyable dream? What was your worst nightmare?" ⁷

There are no right and wrong answers or responses in journal writing, only choices. One option I always leave open to my students is to pick their own topics (when I give topics, I do so mainly for the child who does not possess a more advanced skill in journal writing: self-constructed self-expression). Some of my students choose this avenue and the number increases as time goes on and the skill is acquired. These freely written passages can be most precious of all. It is through reading these pages that I often discover who these children really are.

I had to do a lot of proving myself before I could get my group to exercise their freedom in writing. First of all, I tell the students that these journals are highly confidential, strictly between the writer and me. It is the student's decision to share any journal material with others. I pass out and collect the notebooks each day. Otherwise I keep them locked up so that no student can read anybody else's work.

When I do read their journals, I try my best to be open-minded, understanding, and appreciative of their candor. There have been occasions where I had to fight shock, but that comes with the territory of giving kids permission to tell me anything. While I certainly don't condone everything they're doing, I don't lecture from what I have read in their journals(I keep my own journal for the sake of my own moralizing). I'm just glad that a kid can like himself enough to write anything at all, and that doesn't always come easy. I've had many experiences with the reply "I don't have anything to write." I generally interpret this as "I'm not a worthwhile human being and I think you are; therefore, I won't tell you anything about me since I'm sure that you won't like me." My heart goes out to the child who feels that way. Low self-esteem is a horrid feeling to have, and

the journal can instead help to promote a positive self-image. Using journals as a vehicle, I've seen some incredible changes in student behavior, as well as in the traditional student-teacher relationship, due to positive feedback and persistence in breaking through to these children. "When these behavioral changes are long-lasting, they will lead to changes in a child's attitudes toward himself." ⁸

I previously stated that these journals were not graded. Now I will further explain my viewpoint and why I believe so strongly in ungraded writing assignments. Journals are personal, and highly subjective. The truths which students will often write about are matters of impression, judgement, and interpretation. Journals are certainly full of individual bias which is neither correct or incorrect, it simply is. Opinions aren't grading material.

When I read student journals, I only comment and ask relative questions. "Children often view corrections not as assistance in their education, but as a direct and personal attack on themselves." ⁹ This is exactly what I'm trying to get away from and because of this I limit my comments and questions to the positive. Student journals are designed to be tension-free, without any competition or comparison. Student achievement may be aided when I (the teacher) am viewed "as a friendly person who wishes to encourage communication, rather than as a powerful authority figure who arbitrarily and punitively assigns grades." ¹⁰

It takes some time on the teacher's part to make journal writing successful for everyone, and it really is worth the time invested. I had one student this year who for a while reported daily, "You wouldn't want to know about me." When I asked the class to write about their families, she instinctively wrote, "You wouldn't want to know about my family." My written response was, "Sure I would!" The following day I verbally asked her a few simple questions. "Why don't you start by telling me who is in your family... I know you have a brother in this school. What is his name? Now, who else is there?" I sat listening and prodding this girl for common and basic information. After several of these conversations, she truly sensed that I did want to know these things. It wasn't long before she was able to write these things instead of having to undergo my gentle interrogation. In time this child had the opportunity to gain the feeling that not only did I want to know about her, but that I wanted to know about her because she was somebody who does have worthwhile things to say. these feedback techniques help "foster a sense of accomplishment and self-confidence and are useful to employ with any child." ¹¹

I try to make student journal writing a rewarding and comfortable experience. Since it is a private book, experimenting and exploring are not only allowed but encouraged. I don't want the young writer to worry about perfect spelling, syntax, or punctuation. If students concentrate on those things, they will lose track of the ideas they are attempting to get down on the page. Finally I discourage any forms of censorship. I tell my students not to throw anything away, the reason being that "sometimes you will write something and look back at it a few days later and think it was silly or immature or just plain dumb. However, keep in mind that one of the things you want from your journal is a record of your growth as a person and as a writer." ¹²

What the students are now doing is in fact a form of autobiography, and in order to keep the focus on themselves as the main characters I think it's a good idea to expose them to what autobiography is and what it is not. This is when we enter the reading component of the unit. The first book I've selected to parallel with their own writing is Jamie's Turn, a short adventure-diary written by a child himself. ¹³ The events in this story are very real and somewhat ordinary. Too often children have this wild notion that a hero is someone from the televised world, and this is so far from the truth. Moreover, it is not just the telling of an event in the first-person point-of-view that distinguishes autobiography from other prose styles. Whether the told events are spectacular or simple, all autobiography is bound by common abstract subject matter: the feelings, emotions,

changes, memories, and growth that a character experiences. It is important that students make sense not just of the words and events of which they are reading, but also to make sense of a given person within a realm of the various circumstances. In *Jamie's Turn* the main event is a tractor accident, but the message of the story lies in how Jamie felt and what he did in this situation. On one page he states, "Mom went back to the cornfield after she made the phone call. I stayed with my new baby brother and two sisters. The girls, Tara and Bobbie, were crying. I just held it in. Rut I was nervous." ¹⁴ That is the heart of autobiography: action plus reaction, with an emphasis on reaction.

Another book which I've found greatly appeals to the adolescent population is Walter Dean Myers' *Fast Sam, Cool Clyde, and Stuff* . ¹⁵ In this story, the author reminisces the good and the bad times he and his friends had as teenagers growing up in Harlem. While many of the events are fictionalized, they are still very real. My students were very sad to finish this story after the characters had made such an impression on them. Together, my students and Myers' characters experienced run-ins with the police, encountered death, drugs, and sex—all part of the life of a normal inner-city child.

Other books which I choose are bibliotherapies. "Biblio," of course, refers to books, and "therapy" means to heal. Even though these books are generally fiction, they serve a purpose here. These stories are written to aide children in dealing with their problems through empathizing with like characters. I do, however, remind students that these are fiction so that I can justify the exaggeration, embellishment, or what is simply unbelievable.

Now students are ready to explore some of the different ways autobiography can be expressed. Their journals combined with the classroom readings prepare students to see autobiography as an element as well as a whole. They now have their own autobiographical sketches to examine. Their own private journals can function as unique texts, no two being exactly alike. They can hopefully identify with others, not feel so alone, and be more apt to express themselves. I try to free my students of the self-doubt that inhibits this ability. It is absurd for young people to fear their own writing and be ashamed of their own thoughts. "We have to encourage them to listen to themselves and to take the time to discover who they are for themselves. If teachers respect the voices of the young, and nurture them...then perhaps school will be less oppressive and alienating to the young." ¹⁶

Until now I have focused on the nature of autobiography. Having laid a strong foundation of information with repeated successes, students can now work with what they have in synthesizing their own vivid autobiographies. At this point I ask my students to tell a story, express a reeling, describe an issue, and make a point.

The largest resource any of us has is our own experience and the knowledge gained from it. This unit manifests the reality of that. In teaching these objectives through the strategies which I have described, children's ideas can be freed as they come to believe that yes, even they have a story to tell.

Child Interview

Name Age Birthday

Grade School

1. What do you like most about school?
2. What do you like least about school?
3. Do you like: Math Science Social

Studies Reading Art P.E.

4. Name some things you like to do very much.
5. Name some things you dislike doing very much.
6. What do you do when you can do anything you want to do?
7. What do you do on Saturdays?
8. Do you have a favorite TV program? If so, what?

How much TV do you usually watch?

9. What is your usual bedtime? What time do you usually get up in the morning?
10. Are you supposed to wear glasses? Have you had a really serious illness or injury?
11. Do you have any special chores to do at home?
If so, what?
12. Do you have any brothers or sisters? If so, names and ages.
13. Do you have a pet? What?
14. What would you like to be when you grow up?
What would your parents like you to be?
15. Have you ever been to a: farm circus zoo museum amusement park
16. Do you take special lessons? What?
Do you belong to any teams? clubs?
Other groups?
17. Do you earn money or get an allowance? What do you do with your money?
18. Do you get books from a library? What are some books you would like to own?
Do you read at home? What?
What kind of reading do you like especially?
Where do you do your homework?
What is the hardest thing about reading?

20. Tell me one word that describes you.

Follow-up Activities

1. Telling a Story

- a. Write a character sketch of another person, drawing (in words) what he or she is like.
- b. Write a reminiscence or memoir telling of your times with the person.
- c. Write a dialogue between yourself and this person, an actual conversation written down or one that you remember to the best of your ability.

2. Expressing a Feeling

- a. Write a poem about happiness.
- b. Define sadness in your own words, and give an example of a time that you felt this way.
- c. Write an anonymous letter asking for help with a specific problem you are having.

3. Describing an Issue

- a. Write an editorial for the school newspaper.
- b. Have a classroom debate.
- c. Conduct a mock-trial.

4. Making a Point

- a. Write a letter to the principal asking for his or her attention to your request.
- b. Write a letter to the editor of the school newspaper.
- c. Make an oral presentation to the principal, in which you read your proposal face-to-face.

Suggestions for Short Forms of Writing

- 1. Journals and Diaries
- 2. Anecdotes
- 3. Sketches
- 4. Monologue

5. Dialogue
6. Riddles, Puzzles, and Jokes
7. Poetry
8. Songs
9. Letters
10. Reviews
11. Cartoon strips
12. Directions
13. Posters
14. Bulletin boards
15. Classroom newspaper

Suggestions to Improve Classroom Reading

1. Create a classroom library with books appropriate for all students. Enlarge the collection as student interests grow. House books in wide shelves face out with the colorful jackets showing. Separate these books from classroom texts and other resources.
2. Read aloud and tell personal stories to children on a day-to-day basis. Allow students to select books to be read.
3. Provide time for independent and private reading.
4. Have each child acquire a public library card in his name.
5. Introduce children to the community bookmobile.
6. Visit a bookstore.
7. Study authors of children's books.
8. Supplement the classroom library with magazines, comics, and activity books.
9. Serve as an example for students by reading newspapers, magazines, and books in their presence, and by pointing out items of interest to them from time to time.
10. Work with school officials to provide excellent libraries for all schools in the community.

ENDNOTES

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² Marshall S. Swift and George Spivack, *Alternative Teaching Strategies* (Champaign, IL: Research Press, 1975), p. 148.

³ Paul C. Burns, Betty D. Roe, and Elinor P. Ross, *Teaching Reading in Today's Elementary Schools* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1984), p. 10

⁴ Bentz Plagemann, *How to Write a Story* (NY: Lothrop, Lee, and Shepard, 1971), p. 10.

⁵ Gregory Stock, *The Book of Questions* (NY: Workman, 1985), p. 22.

⁶The Book of Questions , p. 35.

⁷The Book of Questions , p. 37.

⁸ N.L. Gage and David C. Berliner, *Educational Psychology* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1984), p. 188.

⁹Alternative Teaching Strategies , p. 141.

¹⁰ E. Gaudry and C.D. Spielberger, *Anxiety and Educational Achievement* (NY: John Wiley and Sons,-1971) ,p. 26.

¹¹Alternative Teaching Strategies , p. 150.

¹² Susan and Stephan Tchudi, *The—Young Writer's Handbook* (NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1984), p. 39

¹³ Jamie DeWitt, *Jamie's Turn* (Milwaukee, WI: Raintree, 1984).

¹⁴Jamie's Turn , p. 12.

¹⁵ Walter Dean Myers, *Fast Sam, Cool Clyde, and Stuff* (NY: Puffin Rooks, 1975).

¹⁶ Herbert Kohl, "Writing Their Way to Self-Acceptance," (*Grade Teacher* 87, 1969), p. 9.

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