



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

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## **I Am . . .**

Curriculum Unit 88.03.04  
by Bill Coden

Students face the ordinary problems of growing up—hassles with Parents and other authority figures, peer pressure, the opposite sex. The business of finding one's place is compounded by an increasing involvement with today's headlines—drug stings, illegal firearms, despair. Somewhere in this vortex, a sense of self is lost for events just seem to happen.

My unit will be used with an eighth-grade remedial English class which is caught up with and to some extent involved in the flash, glitter, and excitement of the drug world. I have observed an alarming lack of a sense of self-worth and an amazing sense of passivity among these students. Both characteristics cause students to see themselves as powerless participants, as commodities (runners, users), as conspicuous consumers. They do not feel that they can affect change, take charge, overcome. Erik Erikson described adolescence as a turning point animated by increasing energy and vulnerability. Adolescents, in an effort to construct a sense of personal identity, try on a number of selves, discarding some and keeping others. The adolescent learns to say, "This is who I am." <sup>1</sup> We can be of assistance to our students at this point.

My unit will focus on journal writing, both personal and as a record of our readings. The journals will be the repositories of the raw material for later public writing. The readings, for the most part, will be excerpted from autobiographies and will include fiction, poetry, and journal entries. Most reading selections will center on crises and problems and how the writers overcame them. The enthusiasm these students display for reading and discussion will be channeled into their reading journals; this experience will be transferred to their personal journals.

I will begin the unit at the start of the school year and expect to work on it for two marking periods, tying it in with ongoing work on grammar and composition. Some aspects of the unit will extend throughout the year. Given the time and student-load constraints which are part of our daily reality, it is best to structure time in simple ways so that the planning of writing strategies can take place. Most writing will be done during class time to allow for feedback. Extended assignments which will be done out of class will occur in the latter part of the unit.

It is my expectation that the focus on self will enable students to raise self-esteem; to see themselves as agents of change in their own lives; to realize the connections between their past and present and how these connections can influence the future. Writing and reading skills will improve after problem areas have been identified and an appreciation of the autobiographical genre will be gained.

In this unit, a journal is a daybook, an ongoing record of a life. It is not a log which simply lists activities engaged in and food eaten. The question that will be continually addressed in the journals is “Who am I?” The goal is to gain an understanding of our lives. The recognition that each student comes to us with concerns, memories, ideas, and feelings is a guiding principle of the unit. When we help our students choose form, voice, subject, and audience, we give them responsibility and ownership for their writing. (T 5-6)

Journals are valuable for their writers in many ways. <sup>2</sup> A journal contributes to a sense of identity; the writer learns about him/herself through telling the tale. The journal provides someone to listen to what we have to say, whether we are alone or surrounded by others. Witness Anne Frank’s “Kitty” The journal allows the writer to give concrete form to ideas, emerging beliefs, feelings. Journals flourish in a solitude which fosters a growing awareness of the self and may lead the writer to share the self in conversation, merging the public and private selves.

The journal has a stabilizing influence. Since a journal can be reviewed from time to time, the realities and perceptions of past experiences, feelings, and events are close at hand. There is the opportunity to reevaluate behavior and make new choices, assuming responsibility for acts and feelings. There is also the opportunity to revise, to respond to old journal entries from a new perspective. Simons sees the process of journal keeping as one in which “personal effectiveness is fashioned, and this is at the heart of social interaction, politics and morality” (K 17) Change is brought about by journal keeping.

The reasons for keeping journals are many. The most frequently given reason for keeping a journal is the basic desire to preserve memories, to prevent important events or feelings from slipping away. Other writers appreciate the gift of privacy which the journal bestows, the chance to be honest and open. Many use the journal as the place for expressing, coming to terms with, and claiming ownership for feelings. Journal writers often are reminded of their substantiality, their importance, for rereading entries generally encourages them to take charge of their lives because change is noted. The journal is used by some writers as a trouble-shooter, a place to confront and work out possible solutions to problems. (K 24-33)

It is my intent that my student journal-keepers will:

- preserve memories;
- express, confront, and claim feelings;
- be reminded of their importance; ,
- see instances of change;
- trouble-shoot.

The unit will begin with a reading of Eloise Greenfield’s novella, *Sister* . This slim book tells the story of significant events in Doretha Freeman’s life. She records significant events in her “Doretha Book” and frequently turns to the book for solace and for escape. She records the early joy of family life; the circumstances and aftermath of her father’s death; the breaking-apart of her family. Her growing concern over

her sister Alberta's wildness and frequent absences from home are dealt with realistically. Alberta's conviction that she is being left by those she loves and therefore must shut herself off from everyone is movingly depicted. Doretha learns a valuable lesson in keeping on from a family folk story told to her by her grandfather. She is encouraged to seek what is right and good for her, to recognize unrealistic notions for what they are.

This book will be well-received by the class for a number of reasons. The entries in the "Doretha Book" were written at different ages. Students will be encouraged to think and talk about themselves at those ages. The entries are not very long, so reading and discussion of any particular entry can take place in a class period. *Sister* offers a great opportunity for valuable discussions which will later serve as the basis for autobiographical writings; therefore, I do not intend to rush through the book. Students will understand that the themes in the book are common to all people.

Early on in our reading of *Sister*, I will introduce the "reading journal." The reading journal stresses personal responses to what is being read and outlaws plot summary. Students are instructed to think while reading and then to record their thoughts and feelings about what they've read. Reading journal entries will not be made after each selection, for I don't want to downplay discussion. In their reading journal entries, students will be encouraged to write their personal responses quickly, foregoing concern about usage, spelling, and punctuation at this point.

There should be minimal resistance to working in reading journals because we spend a great deal of time discussing what we've read. Entries, at first, will be short and quick. Because using a reading journal will be new to the class, I will have a series of sentence starters available. The sentence starters will stress personal connection with what's being read, expression of opinion and feeling, recall of personal experiences. Some of the sentence starters I'll use are:

I like/dislike this selection because . . .

This character is a lot like me because . . .

I like/dislike this writing because . . .

This selection makes me think about  
because . . .

This situation reminds me of a situation in my own life. It happened when . . .

Reading journals will be written on lined paper and kept in folders in the classroom. I will periodically read them and grade them with a check for completion. Initially, I'll specify that each entry should be at least one-half page in length. I expect entries to become longer when we read more complex selections. After our completion of *Sister*, I will introduce the idea of personal journals. It's absolutely necessary that students understand what a journal is and is not. For our purposes, a journal is a book which is the special property of the writer. Students will select and purchase the book which best suits them, be it a fabric-covered blank book

or a wirebound steno pad. There should be some degree of permanence about the book as well as a sense of identification with and ownership of the book and its contents. Students learn best by doing. They learn to write by writing. The more they write the better they will get. <sup>3</sup> I am confident of this, for I have seen it time and again.

What goes into a personal journal is usually a mixture of whims, ideas, and interests. Students have options about how they set up their journals. Past experience has shown that journal entries will probably deal with the present. Writing exercises will link the past, present, and future. A journal may be a daily account. The events and encounters which stand out in our consciousness do so because they're important to us. These events and encounters should be reported concretely along with the inner feelings and judgments which accompanied them. This will be difficult at first. Students must constantly ask "Why?" Only in this way will they be able to get beneath the surface. The journals will not be allowed to become numerically-ordered logs of a day's events. Simons offers a few prompts for those who are new to journal keeping and may be having difficulty. He suggests:

If I could take a souvenir or keepsake from today, what would it be? Why?  
Of the things which happened today, which would I really like to forget? Why?  
Make a list of people who entered your day in some fashion. Is there something that you would like to say to one of these persons that remained unsaid today? (K 41)

The journal may also serve as a notebook or scrapbook. Photos, headlines, and quotations are but a few of the things that could be included in the journal for they are a display of the author's personal preferences. The photographs will be necessary for activities designed for this unit. Letters might also be kept in the journal, for they can provide clues to the writer's self-concept.

Thus, the journals my students keep will be records of their daily lives. The focus is on important events and the thoughts and feelings of the writers concerning those events.

Personal journal-keeping is a big—and perhaps frightening—step to take. Blank pages are often met with blank stares. In an effort to forestall this reaction, we will brainstorm possible topics for journal entries. This brainstorming is not merely a concoction of topics but rather a recognition of topics already available to students—the stuff of their daily lives. The topics will be copied into the journals and will be there for the writers when they feel they are stuck.

In order to avoid an avalanche of paperwork, a sensible plan for writing and reading journals must be devised. Remember that this work is going on in conjunction with all else that falls to the English teacher—and should have a positive effect on those areas.

At this point, my schema would allow journal-writing to be done daily during the last ten minutes of class. Students may consult the list of possible topics, may write about their day, or may write about any other topic of interest to them. There will be a minimum one-half page of writing daily. Journal entries are confidential with the exception of one entry a week which must be read to the class. On Friday, students will select one entry which they want me to read and respond to. Comments will center on what the students have written

rather than on how they've written.

For the duration of the unit, the class will be reading autobiographical selections, fiction, and poetry. On occasion they will make entries in their reading journals. In other instances, discussion of a particular reading selection may prompt topics for personal journal entries which may serve as the catalyst for further and more public extended autobiographical writing.

Most of our readings will be excerpted from longer works. I will talk to the students about whole works, keeping individual selections in context.

In "The Day I Learned Shame" Dick Gregory relates an early lesson learned in school in the nature of hatred and shame. His fantasies of an ideal home life and future are publicly dashed and ridiculed. His anger at this experience prevents him from helping another human being, the story's most valuable lesson. Students will be asked to write about an important lesson they learned, relating the situation, the teacher, and the value of the lesson.

A selection from *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* will be read in conjunction with the previous story. Douglass relates the trickery he had to use to learn to read and why such desperate measures were important. The salient feature in this selection is the liberating quality reading offers, for your mind belongs only to you.

Judy Collins' song, "My Father", balances the dreams and promises of childhood with the realities of adulthood. The adult looks at present circumstances with the eyes of the child. Students will be encouraged to interview their parents after they've developed a series of questions about childhood dreams and adult realities. After conducting the interviews, students will make journal entries about new views they might have gained about their parents.

A selection from Claude Brown's *Manchild in the Promised Land* harrowingly details one of the most dangerous situations the author had ever been in. As a thirteen-year-old traveling on a path leading directly to a reformatory, Claude is shot. His brush with death prompts a review of what is important to him as well as a redefinition of friendship.

Reading selections will also include autobiographical poetry. The impact of poetry is immediate, avoiding a clichéd "I was born..." approach. Poetry is meant to be presented and shared; it begs for a reaction. "Autobiographia Literaria" by Frank O'Hara contrasts childhood behavior with present-day reality; it marvels and laughs at the tricks life can play. "Nikki Rosa" by Nikki Giovanni tells of the dichotomy of the public and private self; how others see you is contrasted with what you know and feel about yourself.

Photographs will be used to create writing. Students will be asked to respond to images; I expect they'll move from general comments to specific questions, going into greater detail with their observations and writing. Photographs will also serve as prompts for writing dialogues, skits, and conversational poems.

Writing in an autobiographical mode is often compared to painting a self-portrait, for the writer and the artist know their subject well. Both encounter problems peculiar to their medium, be it words or paint. Both must approach their subjects from many perspectives, sticking closely to the truth as much as possible, though some flaws may be eliminated and some good points enhanced. My unit will enable my students to think through plan and execute their self-portraits in words. Our reading and discussions will lead them to see that their feelings and experiences while uniquely their own, are shared by others. For that reason alone, the

feelings and experiences are worth recording, privately and publicly, and sharing. The recording may help them understand themselves better, perhaps even help them to plot future lives; the sharing will be a reminder of our common humanity.

## Activity # 1

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This activity will be done in students' personal journals and will remain a reflection of the private self. It is based on one of the activities in Simons' *Keeping Your Personal Journal*. It is closely related to the sense of discovery which lies at the heart of autobiography and will be done fairly early in the unit.

Students will be asked to:

1. Draw a clockface, without the hands, on a blank journal page;
2. silently ask, "What time is it in my life?" After thinking, draw the minute and hour hands on the clockface;
3. think about how it feels to be at this time in your life. Quickly write down the thoughts you have. Try tying these thoughts, feelings, and facts into a paragraph.
4. After you've completed your paragraph, mentally complete each of the sentence-starters below several times:

It is too late to ...

It is too soon to ...

It is the right time for ...

An alarm is set for o'clock because ...

You may review this page on another day and do some further writing.

## Activity # 2

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Students will read and discuss “Looking in the Album” by Vern Rutsala.

Students will then use a photograph in which they’re the subject, previously included in their journals, to create writing which will be shared with the class. Distinctions between candid and posed shots must be clearly understood, as must the concept of “a moment in time” which is what a photograph captures.

Students with candid shots will write a narrative, telling what events preceded and followed the moment caught by the camera. If the photo is an old one and the student has no memory of what went on, he/she will be encouraged to create a story.

Students with posed shots will be asked to observe the background carefully. If it’s a natural background, they should write about memories associated with the place in the photo. If it’s a stock background, students will be asked to describe it in an exotic, mysterious way.

## Activity # 3

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This writing assignment will be given after students have read “The Day I Learned Shame,” “Learning to Read,” and “Taught Me Purple.”

Students will be asked to think about important lessons they’ve learned in and out of school. After thinking and listing, students will rank-order the five most important lessons, looking for possible connections. Each student will choose one of his/her top five to write about, keeping in mind:

Simply stated, what lesson was learned?

What circumstances prompted the lesson?

How has it proved to be valuable?

Who taught you the lesson?

Students should choose the form they’d like to use: Straight narrative; poem; dialogue; letter. These writings will be shared with the class.

## notes

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<sup>1</sup> Lucy McCormick Calkins, *The Art of Teaching Writing* (Portsmouth, New Hampshire: Heinemann Educational Books, Inc., 1986), p. 105. All subsequent page references to this text are cited preceded by the letter “T”.

<sup>2</sup> George F. Simons, *Keeping Your Personal Journal* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), pp. 10-20. All subsequent page references to this text are cited preceded by the letter “K”.

<sup>3</sup> Frank P. Thomas, *How to Write the Story of Your Life* (Cincinnati: Writer's Digest Books, 1984), p. 10.

## Bibliography for Teachers

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Calkins, Lucy McCormick. *The Art of Teaching Writing*. Portsmouth, New Hampshire: Heinemann Educational Books, Inc., 1986.

A widely-encompassing book which begins with an identification of the essentials in teaching writing and branches out. The developmental approach was most helpful, as were sections on conferencing and connections between reading and writing.

Hartley, William G. *Preparing a Personal History*. Salt Lake City: Primer Publications, 1977.

Presents a simple, practical plan, along with tested research and writing topics, for the construction of a personal history. Many topics are adaptable to classroom use with eighth-graders.

Kanin, Ruth. *Write the Story of Your Life*. New York: Hawthorn/Dutton, 1981.

Offers a helpful discussion of the reasons people wish to record their lives, programmed and open-ended activities, and encouragement to get the project underway.

Porter, Roger J. and H.R. Wolf. *The Voice Within*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973.

A book concerned with the reading and writing of autobiography, the use of autobiography in the classroom. Autobiographical excerpts are presented, analyzed, used as models for writing.

Simons, George F. *Keeping Your Personal Journal*. New York: Paulist Press, 1978.

Concentrates on the process of journal keeping itself. The author proposes to aid and instruct individuals who've chosen to record their lives. There are many really fine activities, illustrations, and suggestions in this helpful book.

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.

## Bibliography for Students

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The stories and poems listed below have been taken from class sets and single copies of books which I have. They will serve as the unit's core reading; many will be used to develop writing activities. A folder of the stories will be kept on file at the Teachers' Institute Office.

Baez, Joan. "My Father" Baez presents a physical, social, and moral portrait of her father. The clustering of



memories is a technique students may wish to use in their writing.

Brooks, Gwendolyn. "We Real Cool. The Pool Players. Seven at the Golden Shovel". Poem.

Brown, Claude. "Every Man's Got to Pick His Time." Danny has kicked his drug habit, this time for good. A cluster of nightmarish memories leads him to choose his time to stop running.

\_\_\_\_\_. From *Manchild in the Promised Land*.\*

Chisholm, Shirley. "Back to Brooklyn". Chisholm reminisces about being kept on a tight rein by her parents, who wanted her to grow up to be something. The opening section is a good example of place memories.

Collins, Judy. "My Father".\*

Cosby, Bill. "Ninth Street Bridge." Cosby humorously relates a childhood encounter with fear, danger, and escape.

Douglass, Frederick. "Learning to Read".\*

Giovanni, Nikki. "Nikki Rosa". Poem.

Gregory, Dick. "The Day I Learned Shame".\*

\_\_\_\_\_. "We Ain't Poor, Just Broke." Gregory reminisces about the greatness of his mother, a woman who kept working, scrambling, and smiling because it hurt too much to cry.

Hansberry, Lorraine. From "To Be Young, Gifted, and Black". Hansberry's journal entries deal with her desire to write out the "stuff" of her life, with truth, with her family, with the influence of place on people.

Hunt, Evelyn Tooley. "Taught Me Purple." Poem.

Inouye, Senator Daniel K. "One Sunday in December." Inouye places himself—and all Japanese-Americans in Hawaii—in a historical context. He recounts the bombing of Pearl Harbor and its aftermath, its effect on his life.

Levenson, Sam. "Everything But Money" Levenson presents a humorous account of growing up poor. Memory clusters around children's escapades and parents' idiosyncrasies.

O'Hara, Frank. "A True Account of Talking to the Sun." Poem.

Rutsala, Vern. "Looking in the Album." Poem.

Sanchez, Roberto and Oscar Lewis. "The Time I Ran Away." Sanchez describes the first time he ran away from home, prompted by a need for adventure and freedom from his family. After barely subsisting for three months, he returns home to be welcomed rather than punished, as he'd expected.

Stuart, Jesse. "As Ye Sow, So Shall Ye Reap." In a work of autobiographical fiction, Stuart's narrator allows himself to be talked into doing something he knows is wrong in order to exact revenge. His second thoughts come too late.

Updike, John. "Ex-Basketball Player." Poem.

Walker, Alice. "To Hell With Dying." Walker presents a loving picture of Mr. Sweet, an elderly neighbor she later realizes was her first love. A humorous recounting of a "revival" from one of Mr. Sweet's many encounters with dying segues into the recognition of loss, aging, and love.

Wallace, Robert. "Moving." Poem.

Wright, Richard. "Betsy." Hunger drives Wright to try to sell his dog; pride and prejudice prevent him from doing so. The dog's death prompts harsh words from Wright's mother, words with which he cannot agree.

X, Malcolm and Alex Haley. "Homeboy." Malcolm's impressions of bigger-city life are mixed in with the education he receives from a new friend, Freddie. The teacher's guiding principle is that everything in the world is a hustle, so act accordingly.

\*Items are discussed in the text of the unit.

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