



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

All About Me

Curriculum Unit 88.03.06
by Diana Doyle

This unit will concentrate on writing activities with children, using exercises that focus on autobiographical thinking and writing. I hope to encourage my students to write. This is, of course, an aim or goal of most teachers, especially teachers of English and literature, but this goal is not so easily attained. How do you as a teacher “get” students to write? How do you encourage them to keep on writing? How can you hope students will enjoy writing and want to share what they have written? How do you as a teacher help students improve, correct and edit, fostering real revision and rewriting, without discouraging creative and enthusiastic impulses? How do you find a way to handle writing assignments in a departmentalized program a situation where as a teacher you may teach over one hundred students? How do you as a teacher keep from getting buried in an avalanche of paperwork? I don’t have any answers to these questions; I have possible solutions that I would like to try with my students.

Finding a writing topic often causes problems for students. A teacher can, of course, assign a topic. I have used a variety of creative topics with varying degrees of success. Students many times love to be given a “story starter”—perhaps a strange situation or a role reversal - something that will ignite the creative spark or at least interest, if not the enthusiasm, for writing. The frustrating part of this kind of assigned writing topic is, however, that it is fragmented, in isolation, and not connected to the class work or reading. What do you assign next? Sometimes one story can lead to another, but often each assignment is separate. Probably the most successful writing assignments, however, come from class reading and discussions.

I think usually it is easiest for students to write about what they know best their lives, their families, their adventures and their memories. However, although students may know about themselves, personal writing is not so easy to begin. I will try to work with personal writing in two ways journal writing and personal fiction based on student reading. Although this may be autobiographical in nature, I do not plan on using the term itself until my students have become comfortable with their writing.

One way students can begin to write is with journal keeping. A journal is very personal as personal as a diary and should be regarded as such. The journal is the student’s own property, inaccessible to anyone else beside the teacher.

Journals can become very important to students, so it is crucial to allow, indeed to enforce, the time for students to write in them on a daily basis. In a departmentalized situation, (i.e., daily class periods of forty minutes or less) where every minute counts and interruptions are frequent, this is very difficult. English

teachers are responsible for introducing and reviewing rules of grammar as well as spelling. However I think to be successful with the journal keeping and with writing on a continual basis, daily writing is very necessary. I plan to try to use the first ten to fifteen minutes of every class period for journal writing on a regular basis.

Since it would be impossible for me to read the complete journals of all the students I have, I will establish a few guidelines for all the students to follow. Generally students like routine and parameters. They like to know what to expect and then can prepare accordingly. Every day at journal time I will expect the students to write at least half a page. At some point during the week, the students will indicate the passage or journal entry that he or she wishes me to read and to comment on, although I will check to make sure that each student is making daily entries. Also I will expect the students to find a passage that they are willing to share with the class or even a small group on a weekly or even biweekly basis. These sharing sessions can be held a few at a time right after the journal writing. It is important for students to feel that their writing has an audience, an audience of their peers and not merely their teacher.

How do you start journals? How do you start any writing? Lucy Calkins, in her book *The Art of Teaching Writing*, suggests a writing workshop approach. (page 24) The teacher talks to the student about the topic. Every writer must think about what he or she is going to write. Many times children think only big things are important-stories must be about something major. The teacher tries to show children that little, everyday topics are worth writing about by relating events out of her own life that she could write about. Several examples should be given to show the kind of brainstorming that could develop a range of options to children. The children could be asked to think of things that really happened to them, things they do and things they know about and to tell them to the person next to them. After a few minutes students can be asked to share what they have come up with. Ideas and topics to write on should come into focus and children may be ready to begin to write about themselves.

Throughout the year mini-lessons on topic selections can be developed as the need surfaces. Children can come to realize that issues written about once can be reworked and retold. Lists of potential topics can be kept in folders. One lesson suggested is a discussion of un-topics. These are such little things that you can't imagine writing about them and yet they make wonderful topics. Ideas such as how you can tell by your mother's face that she is mad at you, and, how I shut myself in my closet and play, were suggested by students in a class. (Calkins, p. 181)

The important part of the journal is that it is the student's own writing and view of the world. The student brings his own feelings, thoughts and memories to his journal.

The literature that students read in class can also trigger personal memories and events in a *Ramona Quimby, Age Eight* by Beverly Cleary. The children love this story about a third grade girl who has all sorts of ordinary and familiar adventures at school and with her family. I think "ordinary" and "familiar" are the key words. The children identify with Ramona, not because they have had her adventures, not because they understand suburban life in a small town in the state of Washington, but because they understand her feelings. They too have shared her humiliation as she throws up in school in front of everyone, they too have followed a fad and looked foolish as does Ramona as she cracks an egg on her head only to find that it was not hard-boiled. My students have felt her anger and her exasperation and felt her coziness and security when all is well in Ramona's world. The book is a rich source of topic ideas for personal memories.

Beverly Cleary has written other books about Ramona and her family and friends, and has published *The Deezus and Ramona Diary*, a commercial diary that uses quotes from many of her books. These quotes are followed by starter lines such as "A time when a friend of mine was very sensitive to my feelings was when

_____” or “It made me feel good when a friend helped me in this way”: These can be used to help a student get that start that he needs. I think that the student again also sees that small events, real feelings, special memories are important and can and should be written about.

Another book the students love to read is *On the Banks of Plum Creek* by Laura Ingalls Wilder. This is a very unique book because it really is autobiography written as fiction. Written in the third person, this novel is a fictionalized account of three years of Laura Ingalls’ childhood. Most children are familiar with the television series and enjoy reading the book. They are really fascinated to learn that the story is real, that Laura was a real person and that her adventures were her selective memories of her childhood. Laura’s “adventures” are for the most part very simple an encounter with a badger when she was being disobedient, watching Pa play his fiddle and sing, walking barefoot to school, arguing With the despised Nellie Oleson; making a button bracelet for baby Carrie these are not the stuff of great events. However they are real life and real feelings and real life more meaningful than “great events.”

One episode that particularly interests the students and causes great discussion is when Laura is disobedient and sets off on a path to a pond where she is forbidden to go alone. She is stopped by an encounter with a badger and returns home with no one aware of her actions. Only she knows what she has done. She knows if she tells that she will be punished and Ma and Pa will be very unhappy with her. Why does she tell on herself? Would you have done that? Have you done that? Have you ever told on yourself and put yourself in trouble? This one simple episode can lead to many written words and heated debates.

Students are also fascinated by Laura’s memory. How could she remember all that she did? How did she remember the parts when she was a baby? They realize that she had to rely on the stories Charles and Caroline Ingalls told her about their life when she was too little to remember. Can students do this? Can they ask their parents for a story about themselves and write about themselves, perhaps even in the third person as Laura did? What are their earliest memories? What details do they remember? Students are impressed by Laura’s sensory recall her visual memory, her description of sounds and smells, her vivid and mouth-watering descriptions of foods. Ideas for writing seem to come from the students themselves—most vivid picture memory, word portrait of a favorite relative, favorite memory. Looking at pictures of Laura and her family can inspire children to look for early photos of themselves and the memories that go with them.

Autobiography as a term can be introduced at this point. Why did Laura choose to write her story as fiction? What is autobiography? Who writes autobiography? Since by now the students have been writing autobiographically, they should realize that autobiography is not just written by the rich and the famous.

Beside *On the Banks of Plum Creek* , I will use a variety of other autobiographical materials, selecting chapters from longer works. Chapters from books such as *Cheaper by the Dozen* by Frank Gilbreth Jr. and Ernestine Gilbreth Carey and the chapter titled “How I Learned to Speak” from the autobiography of Helen Keller are two possibilities since they are very different memories of childhood. Certainly Helen Keller’s memory of a momentous occasion is important. The humor in *Cheaper by the Dozen* and also Russell Baker’s *Growing Up* adds another dimension to reading and understanding oneself. Sometimes events which are not funny at the time become humorous as time goes on. Are the students old enough to appreciate that? Has that ever happened to them?

Selections from *The Diary of Anne Frank* and *The Annex: Anne Frank Remembered* would be very interesting for the students. The autobiographical journal of the young, intense fourteen year-old Anne Frank and the autobiography of Miep Gies look at the horrors of life under the Nazi regime, but from two different vantage points. We can look at the same event such as the evening that Miep and Jan visited the Franks and stayed

overnight at the Annex—a big occasion, especially for the young Anne, starved for news of the outside world. Although Miep knew it was important for the Franks, the event is treated differently in her bittersweet memoir.

How students write is, of course, important. How does a teacher correct, edit or help to revise without destroying the flow of writing? Sometimes a change in approach will help and certainly will be more interesting. Can the student rewrite the passage using the third person instead of the first? Can he make a real event sound more like fiction? A story can be redone as a monologue, or as play dialogue (even acted out), or as a conversation or as a poem. I think changing the technique makes the writing more interesting and more fun, without changing the idea. The students are still writing about themselves and learning about themselves. They are learning that they have more options about expressing themselves.

Lesson Plans

The lesson plans will be similar in that I plan for the students to read, discuss and write. These are separate from journal entries when students write first and may read, share and discuss later. These plans are suggested ways to begin student writing on a personal level.

I. *Seeing an Event Through Different Eyes*

Objective: To show students how two people may look at an event and see it and write about it from different perspectives.

Read passages from *The Diary of Anne Frank* pages 12-17 and pages 35-38.

Read passages from *Anne Frank Remembered* pages 85-88 and 113-117.

These passages describe the frightening time of going into hiding, and an evening when Miep and her husband Henk stayed overnight in hiding at the Secret Annex. Students will read all of these passages and discuss them. Since younger students may not be familiar with Anne Frank, it may be necessary to give a brief background. However, the focus should be on the actual writing and the different kinds of writing private journal or diary and a written to be published memoir of both private and public events. It should be stressed that Anne's diary was never meant to be read. The journal was Anne's way of dealing with the terrible events in her life and the difficulties of being an adolescent in such confined and dangerous living quarters. Further attention should be paid to the events covered in the passages and the feelings of the people writing them. When and how are they alike? When do they seem different? Does the time lapse of years in Miep's case seem to make any difference? Does she seem to remember clearly? Anne's diary was written almost immediately after each event. Does it therefore seem fresher?

Students will be asked to think about some event that involved someone else—a classmate or a friend or relative—and write it as fully and completely as they can, including their own feelings about this event. After a time lapse of a day or so, students will then write this story again, but from the point of view of the other person. How did my mother really feel about this?

Did my friend really think that this was as funny as I did? Will this episode sound like the same one? In some cases there may be students writing about the same incident. If this happens it will be very interesting to compare stories.

2. *Why Write an Autobiography?*

Objectives: To introduce children to autobiography and reasons for writing an autobiography.

Reading: Chapters One and Two of Russell Baker's *Growing Up*

Who writes autobiography? Do you have to be famous? Russell Baker is well-known, but that is not his stated reason for the poignant, expressive and funny story of his childhood. He gives his reasons for writing about his early life in chapter one as he watches his elderly mother mentally floating throughout time, staying mainly in her childhood. He mourns that he knows so little of her childhood and her family, and wonders about the "disconnections" between parents and children. He is writing this for his children who right now are not interested in the good old days, and "when I was young . . ." When they become interested in his childhood, he may be too old to tell them.

The first two chapters offer much in the way of discussion besides the reasons for writing an autobiography.

Who of us has not heard when I was your age, I had to . . . or I couldn't sit around . . . Who of us has not muttered that we were tired of hearing about the dark ages of parenthood.

A photograph of Russell Baker's mother as a young girl sets off a string of questions in his mind. Have we seen such pictures? Is there a collection of photographs at home, an album containing old family pictures that can set off recollections?

How Russell Baker found his calling—why did he become a journalist? Why was his mother determined to make something of him? How was he compared to his sister? How did he seem to feel about this? Does it seem funnier now to us than it probably did to him at the time? Can the students, young as they are, look back to some happening that is funnier now in the retelling than it seemed at the time? Is the humor important in what they have read of this autobiography? Is humor important?

I will ask my students to talk to their parents about their childhood and try to come up with an incident to write about. If they can bring in a photograph of the parent supplying the anecdote, so much the better, and the students can have a real beginning to their own autobiography, by telling about their family. How much can they learn? How far can they go back? How far back can any of us go? (As I have worked and read and thought about this unit, many stories of my parents and grandparents come back to me, and I realize I should write them down before they are lost.) Can a parent tell about his parents, or better yet, can a grand parent tell about his or her childhood? These are valuable sources of stories for children to use if they are available. I think it would be important for the students to collect and write about as many stories of their families that they can. Snapshots and photographs as they can be found can only add to the richness of the family story.

Writing assignments can also be in the forms of poetry. A word portrait of a relative or of an unknown relative or even of a friend can be fun to do and can lead to self portraits. How do I write about myself? How do I write a poem about myself? What can I say about myself? If this is going to be a writing assignment, students can

brainstorm for ideas of what to include—the inside me or the outside me—what do I appear to be like/what am I really like—what are words that describe only me? What were words that described only my mother or my grandfather or my favorite cousin?

3. *Who Writes Autobiography?*

Objectives: To give students further experiences with reading chapters from autobiographies and to encourage autobiographical writing.

Reading: The chapter entitled “How I Learned to Speak” from *Story Of My Life* by Helen Keller.

Chapters one and seven from *Cheaper by the Dozen* by Frank B Gilbreth, Jr. and Ernestine Gilbreth Carey.

“How I Learned to Speak” details the first wonderful understanding the seven-year-old blind and deaf Helen Keller had for the meaning and miracle of language. This happened when her teacher, Miss Anne Sullivan, spelling words on her hand, finally helped her to associate w-a-t-e-r, with the cool wetness splashed on her face and hands. This joy Of discovery led her eventually to her determination to learn to speak a difficult task for a deaf person. This is a very impressive and moving chapter. I think the students will find it somewhat awe-inspiring and Helen’s accomplishments very moving. They will realize that handicapped people can succeed and can write about themselves.

By contrast, the Gilbreths’ chapters show twelve children dealing with a rather intimidating yet very funny father. These children did not have important “big” adventures, but rather very funny, yet ordinary down-to-earth situations, unique only in the time frame of the early twentieth century. I think the students will enjoy these two chapters, perhaps want to read more, and will share the feelings, if not the actual events of the children in this autobiography.

Why should students even try to write autobiographically? Autobiography can tell where you came from, can tell how you got there, what you share with others and how you are you—unique and different.

What are some ways in which students can prepare to write autobiography?

Students can create a time-line. This can serve as a preliminary outline to an autobiography. The students have already read enough to understand the different personal experiences that make up individual lives. Students, aided by their journals, can recall significant and not so significant events that influenced and affected their own lives. These can be recorded both positive and negative along either side of a vertical line that would represent their individual life span from birth to the present. Begin with the left, with birth, memories of parents filling in details, and work along the line. This can be an ongoing process. The time-line does not need to be completed as one project, but can be added to as experiences and episodes are remembered and written about.

Sense memory. This exercise could be done while reading Laura Ingalls Wilder, since her sense memory is so acute. Choose one of the sensations listed. Write an short autobiographical paragraph or scene detailing a memory connected with that sensation: damp cold; dry heat; smoothness; fuzziness; rain; a startling noise; bright dazzling light; an unpleasant/pleasant smell; a surprising taste; a warm, cozy taste.

Use the time-line to build scenes of your life. Write them as a play Or as dialogue instead of a story. Write a story as a flashback or as a letter to a friend or a relative.

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