



Autobiography: Reflections in the Mirror

Curriculum Unit 88.03.08
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This curriculum unit is targeted for students in grades nine and ten but could easily be adapted to other age groups by changing the lesson plans slightly to suit the level of the student. The students that I will be using the unit with are ninth grade students in classes that have been designated as basic and developmental English classes. A basic English class contains students whose reading level ranges from grade level 4.5 to 9.9, the average reading level falling between 7.0 and 8.0. The students in a basic English class can be fairly easily motivated if the lesson is made interesting by using reading they can relate to their own experiences. Reading aloud is sometimes warranted in these classes because special education students are often included in a basic English class. Physically handicapped students can also be found in a basic English class. I currently have a deaf student who understands only by lip reading and requires a particular type of individualization and attention.

A developmental English class is made up of a maximum of seventeen students whose reading levels range from grade level 3.0 to 6.0. These students are remedial in all areas of reading and writing and are often emotionally disturbed, learning disabled and extremely difficult to motivate. Their family problems seem to completely overtake their ability to concentrate on academic work. A lesson plan for these students must motivate them to struggle beyond their deficiencies toward a chance at a successful experience. The lessons need to be interesting and short term with an opportunity for each student to have a successful experience at their particular level.

The thrust of my approach centers around the idea that “small” moments, the tiny threads of our everyday existence, weave the real fabric of our lives. These small moments, certain smells, tastes and often music can help foster an awareness of one’s self through autobiographical writing.

I will use this unit to encourage students in my basic and developmental English classes to write about themselves, to look at their own lives and the people who surround and support them, and in so doing to learn about themselves. My students are predominantly black and Puerto Rican with reading levels between third and ninth grade. I have chosen reading for them by authors who I think they can relate to and whose writing will serve as a catalyst for their own writing.

My goal is to motivate students to write about themselves and their lives through reading about the lives of famous and “ordinary” people. I want to instill in them the understanding that everyone’s life is special, and that we can all learn about ourselves through reading about other people and writing about ourselves and the

people who surround us.

Students will read selected autobiographical pieces. These will include poems, diary excerpts, excerpts from autobiographies, self portrait poems and short narratives. When we study poetry, the students will write poems about themselves or about an incident or a person that reflects something about themselves.

We will begin with a profile of Rita Dove. When Rita Dove won the Pulitzer prize for poetry last year, the second black winner in history, she was suddenly catapulted out of relative obscurity into national prominence. Although she had been writing poetry for nineteen years (with three books to her credit) her reputation existed mostly among fellow poets, until the appearance of her fourth book, *Thomas and Beulah* .

Based loosely on the lives of her grandparents, *Thomas and Beulah* is more personal and more compelling than her previous books of poetry. "The story was writing me," she says. She started with one poem about her grandfather that eventually grew into a whole series. Then she wrote another series about her grandmother. "I'm pleased that I received honors for *Thomas and Beulah* because it is a story of a very ordinary couple not heroes small people of the country. It says something about where our hearts should be." ¹

Dove's poetry covers more than just the black experience, and she objects to being labeled. "Being black tinges the way one sees the world," she says. "But not all the time. I don't want to be put in a category that will limit me." ²

Rita Dove's comments reflect very closely the thrust of my unit as discussed above. The poem we will study together will be Rita Dove's "Sunday Morning at Grandfathers." After a group discussion of this poem, we will write autobiographical poems that tell about ourselves through exploring and relating an experience or memory from our childhood.

Continuing with poetry I will introduce background information about Langston Hughes and begin with a reading of his poem "Motto." We will attempt to discover what Hughes is telling us about who he is and how he feels about life. I will use this discussion as an introduction to writing autobiographical poetry that tells the reader who we are. We will also read self portrait poems written by students. In this exercise I will emphasize the difficulty and challenge of being completely truthful and finding that part of yourself that is different from other people. We will discuss ideas about illustrating the student's self portrait poems with a visual self portrait using various mediums.

¹ Jan Farrington, *Writing* (Illinois: Curriculum Innovations, Inc., 1986), p. 24.

² *Ibid* ., p. 30.

I have chosen excerpts from *The Diary of Anne Frank* to stimulate discussion about diary and journal writing and to make students aware of how a diary can give us historical and social information about a period of time as well as intimate details of a person's life. Anne Frank's diary, which covers a period of about two years, is the story of the suffering of people forced to live in a world of whispers and distrust. It is also the story of the hopes, joys and despair of a teenager growing up during wartime. The students will spend their writing time in class and each evening writing a personal diary. I will not read the student's diaries, unless asked to, but will ask them at the end of the writing period to write a narrative statement telling about the experience of writing

in a diary and reflections about what they learned about themselves through the act of writing about themselves. I hope that this experience will stimulate them to continue diary writing after the unit is completed.

We will continue the unit by reading autobiographical essays and excerpts from larger autobiographies and by discussing the similarities and differences between this longer genre and the shorter poetry and diary forms we have studied. I would like them to consider the question of what form they have studied thus far offers the best avenue of self expression for the autobiographer. "My Struggle for an Education" by Booker T. Washington will be used to begin our study of essays and short autobiographical narratives. Booker T. Washington was never quite sure when he was born, although he thought it might have been 1858 or 1859. Careful records of the birthdates of slaves were not kept on the Virginia plantation where Washington began his life. But from the time he was a few years old, he knew that he desired an education. After the reading of this autobiographical essay we will focus our discussion on how one passion that an individual has can determine the path his life takes and reflect the person that he is. Our writing assignments will explore our personal goals in our own lives and how these goals are already shaping our individual personalities.

My goal is to allow the students to experience first hand what it feels like to write an autobiographical poem or to keep a diary. I think this experience will give them insight into their own past as well as an idea of what the author has experienced in writing in a particular genre.

After reading *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* by Roy DeCarava and Langston Hughes I was struck by how much I learned simply by viewing photographs and reading a few short but powerful lines about a life I am unfamiliar with. In many ways it was more informative and more present oriented than a long autobiographical piece. My goal is to draw from the students a sense of themselves by having them focus on the tiny threads that weave the fabric of their lives. The Hughes and DeCarava book is a wonderful example of this philosophy.

I will incorporate the reading of *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* with a project in which my students will choose a photograph that will become the focal point of a collage. They will write about their feelings and the memories that are elicited when they look at the photograph. The photograph will be surrounded by images, both written and pictorial, that reflect the feelings a student has had at a particular time in his life.

We will spend time together viewing the photographs in *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* and reading the narrative that accompanies the photographs. The students will be asked to write their thoughts and feelings immediately after viewing the book. Then we will begin our discussion and exploration of how photographs interact in the autobiographical act. The students will think about how they feel when they look at certain photographs and how photographs force us to remember painful as well as joyful experiences. Their assignment will be to choose one photograph from their life that will become the focal point of a collage. They will spend time in class viewing the photograph and talking about the photograph with other students and then begin writing about their feelings and memories.

Below are lesson plans that reflect the readings and ideas previously mentioned.

Lesson Plan I Self Portrait Poems

Day 1 Show students a photograph of an individual. Then read them a poem that someone wrote about themselves. Ask students how the poem and picture are similar. Then tell students about self portrait poems and explain the goal of the lesson. A self portrait poem is exactly what the name implies. Instead of picturing how you look on the outside, it gives the reader an indication of what you are like on the inside. The hardest thing about writing a self portrait poem is being completely truthful and trying to find that part of yourself that is different from other people. The goal of our lesson is for each of us to write a self portrait poem that truthfully tells the reader about ourselves and to learn something about ourselves along the way. At this point have each student write a list of things that would tell another person about her/him. Allow students at least five minutes. When they finish have them go through each thing they wrote and check for honesty. Remind them of the difference between what you are and what you would like to be, although the later can certainly be included in the poem. Then hand out the following information with the assignment to begin writing a self portrait poem with the help of these suggestions:

- * Tell your likes and dislikes.
- * Tell what you want to be or do when you get out of school and why.
- * Tell something that someone has said about you, and how it made you feel.
- * Tell about something that made you feel very excited or very sad, and why.
- * Tell something you never told anyone before. It could involve an incident from a younger age.
- * Tell what makes you special and different from someone else.
- * Put each phrase or thought on a separate line so that the end result reads like a poem.
- * Try to use as many similes (comparisons) and metaphors (words or phrases that suggest a similarity) as possible.

Day 2 Students will proofread the self portrait poems with the teacher and then rewrite. The next step would be to have each student share his poem with the class. This can be accomplished in several ways depending on the personality of the class. Here are a few options:

1. Have each student read his/her poem to the class. The class shares feelings about the poem. Always emphasize positive feedback and the truthfulness the poem.
2. Form small groups, three to four students in a group. Students read their poem to the group and discuss together.
3. Each student chooses one person to share his/her poem with. They talk about the poems and write feedback for each other.

Homework assignment: Ask each student to bring in a photograph of themselves that tells about who they are or were at some point in their life.

Day 3 Students share photographs using one of the options listed above for the poetry sharing. Wrap up by asking students to write about the feelings they had while they were writing their poem and what they learned about themselves through the writing process and the group sharing.

Lesson Plan II Langston Hughes: Autobiography Through Poetry

The goal of this lesson plan is twofold. The first is to introduce students to one of the greatest black American poets, Langston Hughes, and to find out about how he got his start. The second is to learn about Langston Hughes through the reading of two of his poems, "Motto" and "Mother To Son." The emphasis is on learning how an author can give you autobiographical information through a short poem that is sometimes directly about himself but often about something or someone else.

Day 1 Give students the following information and read it together. Langston Hughes was born in Joplin, Missouri in 1902. After high school he traveled, worked at odd jobs, and polished his writing in his spare time. His first book, *The Weary Blues*, came out in 1926. Soon after graduating from Lincoln University in 1929, he settled down in the Harlem section of New York City. In addition to poetry, Hughes wrote stories, novels, plays, articles for magazines and newspapers, and two autobiographies.

Read "Motto" aloud. Ask the students what the poem tells them about Langston Hughes. What do the last two lines mean? How could that meaning be related to Hughes' life and career?

Then read "Mother To Son." Have students think about and then write about what advice the mother is telling the son in this poem. How does it apply to Langston Hughes' life? Who is the mother? Who is the son?

Day 2 Autobiographical writing assignment: After rereading "Mother To Son" have each student choose one person in his life who has given him advice. It could be a parent, teacher, relative or friend. Have the students write about the advice they were given and how that advice reflected the personality, background and past experiences of the giver. For example, people who grew up during the Great Depression often give advice about saving money and living a very risk free life. What does this advice tell us about the people who give it? We can learn a lot about a person and his past by the advice they give us. The last stage is to ask the students to visualize the person they have chosen. Ask them to imagine that they are sitting or walking with that person telling them? Start writing lines of this conversation. Speak in the person's voice who is giving the advice and try to use their individual speaking style. The result will be a poem that tells about this person through the conversation and advice.

Although this exercise is also biographical in nature, I think that the choice of confidant and the tone of the conversation tell much about the author.

Lesson Plan III Diaries

Because diaries are so truthfully autobiographical and teenagers love to write in them, Anne Frank's diary is of interest to high school students and can be used as a motivational tool for them to write their own diary or journal entries. Begin the lesson by offering the following information. On Friday, June 12, 1942, Anne Frank celebrated her thirteenth birthday. One gift she received was a diary. In it she began to record her thoughts and feelings. Several years later her diary would become not only a best-selling book but also an important document of World War II. Then read with your students excerpts from *The Diary of a Young Girl* by Anne Frank.

Day 2 After reading, discuss how diary writing can be used as a means of self expression and self knowledge. Also discuss how certain individual diaries can give us historical and social information about a period of time as well as intimate details of a person's life.

For the next seven days assign diary writing each evening. Encourage students to express themselves freely. Unless asked, I would not read diary entries. The experience of keeping a diary is what is important. Each day talk to the students about how their diary is progressing. At the end of the seven days have the students write a narrative statement reflecting on the experience of diary writing and commenting on what they have learned about themselves through their writing. Hopefully, students will be motivated by this experience and continue to write in a diary after the lesson is completed.

Lesson Plan IV Autobiography Through Photographs

This project can be used at the end of a unit on autobiography or at any time during the year. This project integrates reading, writing and photography through autobiography. The text that will be used is *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* by Roy DeCarava and Langston Hughes. After handing out the book ask students to consider the meaning of the title as they are reading.

Day 1 Introduce Langston Hughes to students. See background information in lesson plan 2. Read *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* . For the first five to ten minutes allow the students to quietly flip through the book. This book is a compilation of photographs taken by Mr. DeCarava with a narrative written by Langston Hughes. The voice that Hughes uses is that of an older black woman living in Harlem who is taken ill and talks to God about not being ready to die yet because she has too many people depending on her. Read the story aloud with your students. Encourage them to spend time looking at the photographs and talking about whatever comes to mind. The images in this book are very powerful and the text is poignant. After the reading ask each student to write his impressions.

Day 2 Ask students to share what they have written from Day 1. Discuss how photographs interact in the autobiographical act. Talk about the different way we feel when we read about a person as opposed to looking at a series of pictures of that person. Tell the students that their project will be to choose one or more photographs of themselves that will become the focal point of a collage. They should bring the photographs in within the next few days. Time in class will initially be spent viewing the photographs with the class or in small groups. The students will write about the feelings they have when they look back at the pictures. After proofreading with the teacher, the student will mount his photograph(s) and writing. Encourage them to use

any other medium of self expression that they feel would enhance their collage. The goal of the finished product should be to give the viewer an immediate and compelling sense of the author. State this goal and discuss it with your students at the beginning of the unit. The writing, photographs, and any other material they choose should mesh together to form a piece that states something special about them to anyone who views the collage.

Lesson Plan V Rita Dove: Autobiography Through Family Memories

Introduce Rita Dove to your students with this background information. When Rita Dove won the Pulitzer prize for poetry in 1987, the second black winner in history, she was suddenly catapulted out of relative obscurity into national prominence. Although she had been writing poetry for nineteen years, her reputation existed mostly among fellow poets, until the appearance of her fourth book, *Thomas and Beulah*. This book is based loosely on the lives of her grandparents. Rita Dove felt that by writing about her grandparents she was really writing about herself. Dove was born in Akron, Ohio and teaches English at Arizona State University. Read aloud "Sunday Night at Grandfather's" from Dove's *Museum*. Stimulate discussion by asking the students to define autobiography. Is it only an author writing about herself? How else can we tell people about ourselves, our lives? Suggest that one way to tell the reader who we are is by writing about our roots. After a group discussion of "Sunday Morning at Grandfather's," ask the students to think back and remember special moments, places or people from their past. Have them write any thoughts that come into their minds as they are remembering. Explain that they will write autobiographical poems that tell about themselves through exploring and relating an experience or memory from their childhood.

Teacher and Student Bibliography

* Adams, William, Peter Conn, and Barry Slepian, eds. *Afro-American Literature: Nonfiction*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1970.

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Beginning with the assassination of Martin Luther King, this book chronicles King's fight for freedom. The text and photos are powerful reminders of the strength, conviction and love that this great leader inspired.

DeCarava, Roy and Langston Hughes. *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1955.

This is a fictional account of the thoughts of a black grandmother who is taken ill and talks to God about why she needs to continue living because of the many people who depend on her. Through powerful photographs

and text the reader is brought into the life of blacks in Harlem. This is a touching and informative book.

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This book of poetry is beautifully written and tells a lot about the author as well as the background she grew up in.

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* Taylor, Karl T. *stages in writing* . New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973.

A writing text that integrates grammar, mechanics, rhetoric and writing. This text aims to teach the abstract writer to become more specific. Many writing assignments.

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An uplifting autobiographical essay about Washington's desire and struggle to become educated.

*These texts are particularly helpful and informative for teachers.

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