



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

Knowledge of Self Through the Study of Autobiography/Biography

Curriculum Unit 88.03.09
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This unit is written for high school students. The readings and activities presented here will be for college or general level freshmen, sophomores and juniors. It can be adapted to suit any reading or grade level. The unit is designed to take a semester. Aspects of the unit can be used for whatever time period the teacher chooses.

Biography and autobiography are important genres for adolescents to learn more about and to become comfortable working on. The emotional, psychological, philosophical and societal issues that adolescents face are stressful for any adult, but can be devastating to a teenager. Knowledge of who they are and what their potential can be is vitally important to their survival.

Learning about oneself is a lifelong process, as we all know; it can begin in earnest in high school. New Haven high school seniors are required to write an Autobiographical Sketch as part of their post secondary school package. After three years of helping seniors write their Autobiographical Sketches, it is clear that more thorough instruction must be done to get students past, "I was born . . ." Self-exploratory units of reading and writing exercises should be given to freshmen, sophomores and juniors, so that by their senior year an Autobiographical Sketch is, for them, "a piece of cake."

Career High School is composed of about 50% black, 40% Hispanic, and 10% white, Chinese, Korean and Vietnamese students. I want students to know themselves and each other, ethnically and culturally. America is a "melting-pot" of many races and ethnic cultures, but most of us have failed really to assimilate, and assimilating to the extent that one's cultural integrity is lost is of questionable value.

Students are looking for something, often they are looking for themselves. Often, they don't know where or how to look. The study of autobiography / biography with varied readings and activities based on their ethnic group and the ethnic groups of those around them can help to provide answers to the age-old questions of, "Who am I," "Where do I come from," and "Who do I want to be?" The following quotation from Ralph Ellison's

Invisible Man summarizes the way many adolescents feel and could be used to introduce the unit to students:

" . . . All my life I had been looking for something, and everywhere I turned, someone tried to tell me what it was. I accepted their answers too, though they were often in contradiction and even self-contradictory. I was naive. I was looking for myself and asking everyone except myself questions which I, and only I could answer." ¹

Students might read Maya Angelou's, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* . In introducing the book, I would

stress the fact that Ms. Angelou has written four autobiographies over the past twenty years. This fact emphasizes that a life is not static. One continues to grow. One continues to evaluate. One continues to reassess one's decisions. One continues to revise one's decisions (or one ought to).

Ms. Angelou is a 60 year old black American writer and an actress. She is a performer and a gifted storyteller. Her autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* describes her life as a child to teenage. Maya Angelou's *Gather Together In My Name*, *Singin' and Swingin' and Getting Merry Like Christmas*, *The Heart of A Woman*, and *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes* chronicles her life from age twenty to 1984. Ms. Angelou's life story is that of a survivor. She is candid and her stories are interesting. Ms. Angelou's autobiographies describe growing up, incest, rape, family, learning how to survive, prostitution, marriage and divorce.

Many autobiographies / biographies are written within a historical context. Students need to get to know themselves within a historical context, too. The historical and/or political framework in which most of them have lived has been bleak. Prior to 1975, homelessness was not rampant, unwed parenthood was not accepted, hardcore drug use was not epidemic.

The Autobiography of Malcolm X by Alex Haley, discusses drug use and sale relatively thoroughly. The Nation of Islam (Black Muslims in America) and Malcolm X's religious evolution within it is also explored. Malcolm X was a great political leader. His autobiography describes the evolutionary thinking of a man who changed the thought processes of many black Americans. Reading Malcolm X's autobiography can inspire pride and motivation in students. It was Malcolm X who urged blacks to formulate their own definitions of themselves and for themselves.

Chinese-Americans have a long, interesting history in the United States. Most Chinese-Americans know their history, few Americans do. Maxine Hong Kingston's *China Men* is valuable reading in its entirety, or sections can be read. The chapter, "The Brother in Vietnam," is particularly recommended if the teacher chooses to use a segment of the book. This chapter describes America's war economy, the draft, draft evasatory tactics, war atrocities and education. Ms. Kingston's youngest brother, a high school English teacher, served in the Navy during the Vietnam War.

El Bronx Remembered, by Nicholasa Mohr, is a collection of short-stories which discuss Puerto-Rican adjustment to life in the United States. I would begin the unit on Puerto-Rican culture by reading the introduction to Ms. Mohr's book to the class:

There have been Puerto Ricans living in the mainland U.S.A. since the middle of the last century. But it was after the second World War, when traveling became cheaper and easier, that the greatest influx began. In 1946, Puerto Ricans could purchase, for a small amount of money, a one-way ticket to the mainland. As citizens they did not face immigration laws or quotas . . . and so they arrived by the tens of thousands, first by freighter and later by airplane.

A small percentage went to work as migrant workers in the rural areas of the country. The majority settled in New York City. Many went to live in Spanish Harlem, known as El Barrio, an older community of Spanish-speaking people, on Manhattan's Upper East Side. There they joined family and friends. Others moved into congested neighborhoods inhabited by the children of earlier immigrant groups. Thus, they formed new neighborhoods in Brooklyn and Manhattan's Lower East Side. One area in particular was heavily populated by these newcomers, and became an extension or suburb of Spanish Harlem. This was the South Bronx, known to the Puerto Ricans as 'El Bronx.'

These migrants and their children, strangers in their own country, brought with them a different language, culture,

and racial mixture. Like so many before them they hoped for a better life, a new future for their children, and a piece of that good life known as the “American Dream.”²

Each short story in *El Bronx Remembered*, by Nicholasa Mohr, is worth reading. Particularly recommended is, “A Very Special Pet.” It is a story about a family who keeps a live chicken in their apartment. “Shoes for Hector,” is a story about a young boy who is given a pair of shoes for his graduation that he is embarrassed to wear. Edward Rivera’s *Family Installments Memories of Growing Up Hispanic*, is a book students will enjoy reading. It is a book about a man who was born in Puerto Rico and grew up in extreme poverty, in New York City. Mr. Rivera put himself through college and presently teaches English at City College of New York.³ If the book cannot be read in its entirety, recommended reading is the chapter, “Caesar and the Bruteses: A Tragedy.” Juniors who read *Julius Caesar* as sophomores will enjoy Mr. Rivera’s struggle with his reading of *Julius Caesar* while he was in the eighth grade. *Family Installments Memories of Growing Up Hispanic*, discusses family values, Hispanic culture, poverty and the importance of learning.

The unit explores the racial, ethnic, cultural, religious and historical backgrounds of blacks, Hispanics and Asians. The purpose will be for each student’s own understanding of himself and the understanding of other students of cultures other than their own.

Activities related to the readings and to self-understanding will be presented to students as they read, and will include:

1. Class activity Each person in the class will present a valued childhood picture of themselves and will explain its value to the class.
Each student will keep a journal of their experiences, their impressions, their studies, their triumphs and their trials over a period of time. (Hopefully, journals will be kept over a period of years so that they can be referred to when it is time for them to write their Autobiographical Sketch.) Periodically, suggestions will be given to students to inspire them to write and to nurture their development of different points of view. The content of each student’s journal will be private; confidentiality will be guaranteed. Journals will be read and commented on occasionally. The purpose of keeping a journal is for students to begin to discover their own voice. Students will also be working on improving their writing skills. Students will be encouraged to become aware of the value of their experiences as those experiences relate to the person they are becoming.
- 2.
3. Role play will be an occasional activity in response to issues raised from reading. The purpose is for students to get to know how others think and to get to know each other better.
4. Vocabulary development of autobiographical / biographical terms and vocabulary from reading.
5. Periodic discussions of readings with teacher and student generated questions as they apply to the reading and to the development of student self-knowledge.
6. Inter-cultural Banquet (potentially a school-wide event.)
7. Members of local college Cultural Affairs Associations to be guest speakers to discuss various topics with students and to act, potentially, as role models for individual students.
8. An Interview Sheet (included in unit) to facilitate student ability to question and document background information about family members. This activity intends for students to learn more about their family’s history and their stories.

- Class activity Each student will be asked to bring in their favorite recording or the words to their favorite song. These records will be played for the class and each student will be asked
9. to explain why this song is important to them. The purpose of this assignment is another way that they can begin to know who they are. It is also an opportunity for the class to get to know each other better.
 10. Class activity Students will make a collage using pictures cut out of magazines that represents each ethnic group and will be displayed in the classroom.
Students will be asked to rank the most serious problems facing the United States today. (List of problems included in unit.) After the most important problem is selected, we will consider how the problem can be solved. Our school has a S.A.D.D., Students Against Drunk Driving, chapter. As a result of the ranking of the number one problem we may decide to form a chapter to confront a different pressing social problem such as homelessness, hunger, unwed parenthood, or the misuse of nuclear energy. The purpose of this activity will be for students to get to know that they can contribute to society and that they can make a difference.
 - 11.

Interview Sheet

Name of relative:

Approximate age: Place of birth:

How is this person related to you?

What story did your relative tell you that you want to record?

(Additional lined paper can be used if necessary)

Recorded by: Date:

Most Important Social Problems

Directions: Number the problem you think is most serious in the United States today.

———Illegal drug use.

———Sexually transmitted disease (A.I.D.S., etc.)

———Potential of a domestic nuclear accident.

———Poverty.

———Homelessness.

———Hunger.

- Inadequate education.
- Pollution.
- U.S. Government budget deficit.
- Pornography.
- Unemployment/underemployment.
- Waste removal.
- Unwed parenthood.
- Cost of living.
- Cost of housing.

Lesson Plans

Lesson Plan 1

Introduction of unit Teacher will state the purpose of the unit. In this unit you will explore yourself. You will examine what you believe, who you are and who you want to become.

Distribute vocabulary with definitions and discussions. (Autobiography, biography, narrative, personal voice, values, identity, crisis, goals, ethnic, assimilate, culture, etc.)

Assignment: Have students buy a 8' x 11' notebook, exclusively for use as a journal. Ask students to bring in a valued childhood picture of themselves, explain.

Lesson Plan 2

Have students present their photographs to the class and to explain its importance. This activity is an icebreaker. It is a way for students to begin to get to know each other better. (Depending on the size of the class this activity might require more than one class period.)

Lesson Plan 3

Distribute reading: " *from Invisible Man* ," by Ralph Ellison. Read this segment aloud with the class. Discuss issues raised in this segment.

Assignment: Write a short paper, one to three pages, describing a crisis of identity that you faced and how you resolved it.

Lesson Plan 4

Introduce students to the concept of the journal. Refer to the aforementioned ground rules for the journal and

discuss with the class.

Assignment: Have students begin their journals. Suggested topic might be: The First Thing That I Remember . . .

Lesson Plan 5

Photocopy and distribute the ranking sheets of The Most Important Social Problems. When students have finished ranking their sheets, put the results on the blackboard or on a pre-prepared tally sheet. Discuss the results.

Assignment: Have students write a one to three page paper discussing what can be done to correct the problem they ranked as number one.

Activity - Discuss with the class the possibility of forming a student organization to confront the problem that most students ranked number one.

Lesson Plan 6

Have students read: Nicholasa Mohr's Introduction to " *El Bronx Remembered*" (included in unit). Discuss with students and make a listing on the blackboard of what comprises "The American Dream."

Assignment: Have students write, a one to three page paper, which discusses which aspects of "The American Dream" are easily attainable and which are not.

Lesson Plan 7

Teacher will define *genealogy* . (*Genealogy* A chart or recorded ancestors. New World Dictionary.)

Write your own family tree or an example of the form on the blackboard.

Assignment: Have students begin to write out their family trees. Have students interview their parents about the names of their parents and other relatives to complete their family trees as far as they can go. (This assignment can be an early journal entry.)

Lesson Plan 8

Have students read: "Caesar and the Bruteses: A Tragedy" from Edward Rivera's book, *Family Installments Memoirs of Growing Up Hispanic* . Discuss this segment with the class.

Discuss with students the misspelling of *tragedy* (tragedy) and why Edward Rivera opted to misspell it.

Assignment: Have students write a one to three page paper that discusses what word they misspell most often and their reasons for misspelling it.

Footnotes

1. Ralph Ellison, "from *Invisible Man* ," in Quincy Troupe and Rainier Schulte, editors, *Giant Talk* (New York: Vintage Books, 1975), p. 163.
2. Nicholasa Mohr, "Introduction," from *El Bronx Remembered* , (New York: Bantam Books, 1975.) No page number.
3. Edward Rivera, *Family Installments Memories of Growing Up Hispanic* , (New York: Penguin Books, 1982) No page number.

Teacher's Bibliography

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autobiography of Edward Rivera, who was born in Puerto Rico and was raised in New York City. An interesting book about Puerto Rican culture, family, values and learning.

Troupe, Quincy and Schulte, Rainier. *Giant Talk* . New York: Vintage Books, 1975. An anthology of third world writings including black, Hispanic, African and Asian writers.

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Student's Bibliography

Kingston, Maxine Hong. *China Men* . New York: Ballantine Books, 1977. An interesting well written autobiographical novel about Chinese-American culture, history and legends.

Mohr, Nicholasa. *El Bronx Remembered* . New York: Bantam Books, 1975. A collection of short stories about Puerto Rican children growing up in New York.

Rivera, Edward. *Family Installments Memories of Growing Up Hispanic* . New York: Penguin Books, 1982. Edward Rivera's autobiography, which describes his family, culture, and educational experiences in Puerto Rico and New York.

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