



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

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## **Learning About Self and Others Through Autobiography**

Curriculum Unit 88.03.10  
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This curriculum unit will be used as a segment of the American literature course for general level sophomores. Also, it could be integrated into a college or honors level novel course since most of the short stories used in this unit are adaptations from novels. It should take at least four to five weeks to cover adequately the stories and the poem in this unit.

My first thoughts about teaching a unit about “self” came to me after teaching for nine weeks at Career High School. Since I had previously only taught in the South, I was accustomed to teaching only black and white students. Teaching in New Haven has exposed me to Jewish, Puerto-Rican, Mexican, and Danish students. I became very interested in the different cultures of my students, and I also realized that my students lacked self esteem and respect for other students and their cultures. Therefore, I decided to devise a unit that would unite the different backgrounds of my students and help them learn more about themselves and their classmates.

In order to achieve the objectives to be discussed later in this unit, the main focus of this unit will be the autobiography. The autobiography will be the main focus because it will allow students the opportunity to truthfully examine their feelings, thoughts, and actions. This will enable students to get in touch with themselves, and getting to know and understand others. Also, the autobiography will help students find unique qualities about themselves, and this is important because knowing that one possesses unique qualities helps to raise and/or attain self esteem.

Since America is a “pluralistic society,” there is a need for developing pride in ethnic heritage. From this new awareness, one is better able to reach out toward others and appreciate the unique contributions to the quality of life which comes from all of us. Too often students feel they have no need to “know” about others, and this poses a problem because if students cannot relate to and respect others while in their youth, they will not be able to do so later in life.

The autobiography will be used as a tool or as a means in this unit to help bridge the gap between the different cultures of students, to help students recognize who they are, and to help students be proud of their heritage. In order to achieve these successes through the autobiography, students will keep daily journals, write autobiographical compositions, and read autobiographical short stories that explore different cultures.

As many English teachers know, getting students to write can be a very traumatic experience. I have found that students enjoy writing about themselves. Therefore, I have my students keep a journal before, during,

and after the completion of this unit. Keeping a journal before the start of this unit is very effective in that it tunes students' minds toward writing about themselves, and since this unit is, in part, about self and autobiography, students will have a head start. Keeping a journal during this unit is a must because it helps students learn to write truthfully about themselves and how they relate to their environment. Students will also use the entries from their journals to complete writing activities. Having students keep a journal after the completion of this unit is one way to help improve their writing skills because they will write daily. Also, the journal can serve as a reflection piece at the end of the year. Students should be given enough time either at the beginning of the period or at the end of the period to make entries into their journals.

To keep students interested in writing daily in their journals, I give my students a list of questions each Friday. The answers to the questions are found in their journals. If students are too shy to share their journal entries with the class, they might feel more comfortable with sharing the answers to the questions. Also, I keep a daily journal and I participate with the students in the sharing of some journal entries. The following is a list of questions given to students to answer about their journal entries.

1. Did you make any new friends this week?
2. Did you make any enemies this week?
3. What was the best thing that happened to you this week?
4. What was the worst thing that happened to you this week?
5. Did you learn anything new about yourself this week?
6. Do you think next week will be a better week?

The questions may vary from week to week, or the same questions may be asked each. The latter is preferred because students will be able to compare the progress or decline of their personal lives. Also, students may decide to change their actions in order to have more favorable responses to the questions. Teachers may choose to select their own questions depending upon the caliber of students, but keep in mind that the questions asked should be the type that *all* students will be able to answer.

The five short stories and one poem chosen for this unit are unique because they are all autobiographical selections, and each is written by a writer of a different race and culture; each race represents my students and their cultures.

The five short stories include:

- “My Furthest-Back Person-The African” by Alex Haley
- “Where Nothing Is Long Ago” by Virginia Sorensen
- “On The Edge Of The Barrio” by Ernesto Galarza
- “The Children’s Transport” by Lore Groszman Segal
- “Puerto-Rican Paradise” by Piri Thomas

The introduction includes the poem “Nikki-Rose” by Nikki Giovanni.

As stated earlier, the main objective of this unit is to help students better understand themselves, their classmates, and the different cultures of their classmates through the autobiography. The students should also be able to

1. appreciate the variety and drama of autobiographical nonfiction
2. understand and appreciate a person’s feelings and motivations
3. recognize and define words of Yiddish, African, and Spanish origins
4. write about related personal experiences
5. write about an event from a different point of view

I chose the poem “Nikki-Rosa” as an introduction for this unit because it discusses the importance of self and relating oneself to others.

...and I really hope that no white person ever  
has cause to write about me  
because they will never understand Black  
love is Black wealth . . . <sup>1</sup>

Although the poem speaks of the Black experience, it can speak for any race of people. Students should note that Giovanni is saying that no one knows you—but you. This poem will help students understand that it is very important to know oneself and to understand oneself before one can relate to others. Also, the poem expresses that no one can write candidly about the experiences of another’s life as well as the person who actually lived that life. After a full interpretation of the poem, I think it would be an excellent time to explain the theme of this unit to the students. The students should be aware that this unit will help them gain knowledge of their classmates’ culture and of themselves. This is also an excellent time to give the students a brief biographical sketch of the writers included in this unit.

Alex Haley (born 1921)

Remembering the stories his grandmother told him when he was a child growing up in Henning, Tennessee, Haley set out to trace his ancestors back to “the African” who was captured, made a slave, and shipped to America. His journey eventually took him to a village in Gambia whose oral history enabled him to identify his ancestors and to meet several of his distant cousins. Haley had begun to write during a twenty-year career with the U.S. Coast Guard, eventually holding the position of Chief Journalist. When he retired in 1959, he turned to writing magazine articles and was co-author of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. His most famous piece of writing is *Roots* published in 1976.

Virginia Sorensen (born 1312)

Born in Provo, Utah, Virginia Sorensen traveled a great deal. A Mormon who graduated from Brigham Young University, she won two Guggenheim fellowships for her writing; one took her to Mexico, another to Denmark. Her work includes both adult novels and books for children.

Ernesto Galarza (born 1905)

Ernesto Galarza was the leading authority in the U.S. on migrant labor and Mexican immigration. He went to California from rural Mexico as a boy, working as a farm laborer during his school vacations. After working his way through high school, he held a job in a cannery while attending Occidental College. Later he earned a master's degree from Sanford University and a Ph.D. from Columbia University. In *Barrio Boy*, Galarza describes his boyhood in Mexico and Sacramento.

Lore Groszman Segal (born 192B)

Lore Segal was born in Vienna, studied at the University of London, and now lives in New York. She has taught English in the Dominican Republic and lectured as a visiting professor at Bennington College and Princeton University and as assistant professor at Columbia University. Her writings include an autobiography, *Other People's Houses*, and several books for children.

Piri Thomas (born 1928)Piri Thomas grew up in the streets of Harlem's Puerto-Rican barrio, the oldest of seven children. He served a four year prison term, during which time he became interested in serious reading and stated to write. After his release, he worked in a drug rehabilitation center and later went to Puerto Rico to organize a similar center. There he attended the University of Puerto Rico. Thomas wrote the narration for the film *Petey and Johnny* about Spanish Harlem, and later an autobiographical novel, *Down These Mean Streets*.

Teachers may choose to have students do further research on the writers.

Since I have chosen four to five weeks for the completion of this unit, some of the short stories may be read orally and/or silently in class, as well as be assigned for homework. Being that my students are of general caliber, the bulk of the reading will be read orally in class.

Because students should be able to recognize the main character, Kunta-Kinte, the first story chosen is "My Furthest-Back Person-The African." This story is adapted from the novel, *Roots*. The importance of one's ancestry in the life of a black man and the realization of self are examined in this short story.

The second story to be examined is "Where Nothing Is Long Ago." This story examines life in a Danish community in the 1920's through the eyes of a nine year old Danish girl. This story also closely examines the Danish family.

The third short story chosen is "On The Edge Of The Barrio," adapted from *Barrio Boy*. This story examines the plight to the Mexican-American migrant workers around World War I. A young Mexican-American boy succeeds by leaving the migrant camps to become well educated and successful. This story relates a hard struggle but a successful ending.

The next story discussed in this unit is "The Children's Transport," adapted from *Other People's Houses*. I chose this story because it discusses the lives of Jewish children being taken from their parents during Hitler's invasion of Austria. Students may need additional background about the Holocaust to gain a better

appreciation of the deep impact of the story. Also, this story should be read orally so students can hear the vivid description of the writer's experience. To gain more knowledge of the Holocaust, the teacher should invite a person who experienced the Holocaust to class to talk to the students.

The last story selected for this unit is "Puerto-Rican Paradise." This story examines the harsh life of a Puerto-Rican family living in New York. The mother dreams aloud to her children about the "good" life in Puerto-Rico. The story also examines the life of a Puerto-Rican father.

Each of the stories discussed in this unit relates a different theme, and each theme should be discussed in full with the students. The discussion of the themes will give the students an understanding of the different cultures. When possible, students who are of the same cultural background as the writers should give additional information to the class. The teacher should encourage this.

Since the stories in this unit are autobiographical and in most cases sad, they will evoke some type of emotions in the students. This is the power of autobiography, because it is real. The teacher should point out to the students that some aspect of their lives can evoke the same emotions from others. It is also important to note that a tragic event is not the only prerequisite for writing about oneself. Everyone is unique in their own way, and because of this uniqueness, everyone has a special story to tell. The autobiography is the tool that allows everyone the opportunity to honestly and openly tell others about their unique qualities. Also, the autobiography helps one to find and define oneself, and because of this one can relate to and accept others.

## Lesson Plan I

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**Objectives: To realize the importance of one's ancestry.**

To define and recognize words of African origin. To make inferences and judgments.

**Procedures: Read "My Furthest-Back Person-The African"**

**Vocabulary: Although some of the words are quite common in our language, they came originally from Africa.**

gorilla  
gumbo  
chimpanzee  
oasis  
banjo  
yam  
zebra

The teacher should have students look up other words that are common in our language but come from African origin.

### **Questions for Discussion:**

1. How does the author become interested in his African ancestry?
2. What steps does he take in order to learn about his ancestors?
3. Why does Haley experience a sense of guilt when he finally meets his African relatives? Do you think that his feelings are justified?
4. How do his African relatives react to him before and after they know who he is?

### **Writing Assignments:**

The writing activity for this story involves students interviewing their “furthest-back person.” Although some students may not have easy access to their “furthest-back person,” (i.e., grandmother, grandfather, great-aunt, etc. . . .) students can interview their parents, because their parents can relate stories to them about their older relatives. Students are to compose a story using the notes from the interview. The stories are to be shared with the class.

From this assignment, students may find out new information about their family, and they could also find out new information about themselves.

## **Lesson Plan II**

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**Objective: To realize the importance of a community or neighborhood.**

To recognize the importance of setting.

To recognize the difference between a child’s point of view and an adult’s point of view.

**Procedure: Read “Where Nothing Is Long Ago”**

**Vocabulary: In order for students to gain a better understanding of the story, the teacher needs to explain what irrigation is and how it works.**

### **Questions for Discussion:**

1. What was unique about Virginia’s community?
2. In what way is the Utah setting of the story especially important?
3. Explain why Virginia has a different perspective about the “murder” than her parents. Does her age and level of experience have anything to do with her feelings?

## **Writing Assignment:**

Since this story relates a tragic event that affected an entire community, students should write about an event that occurred in their neighborhood or involved their neighborhood. The writing should include their own personal feelings and the feelings of the people in their neighborhood.

From this assignment, students will find (with the teacher's help) that it is okay for people to have their own opinions about certain things, and as one matures, so will their outlook on certain subjects. Also, the teacher should point out that the event the students choose to write about need not be a tragic event. The stories should be shared with the class.

## **Lesson Plan III**

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### ***Objectives: To make inferences and judgement***

To recall specific detail

To determine a character's feelings

To recognize and define Yiddish words

### ***Vocabulary: Although some of the words are common in our language, they are Yiddish.***

bagel  
matzo  
chutzpa  
kosher  
yarmulke

The teacher should have students look up other words that are common in our language but come from Yiddish origins.

***Procedure: If possible, the teacher should invite someone who experienced the Holocaust to talk to the class. I advise this before the reading of the story so students will have an idea of the severity of the Holocaust.***

Read "The Children's Transport"

## Questions for Discussion:

1. Why is Lore so grieved at throwing away the Knackwurst?
2. Why does Lore leave Austria?
3. How do her parents feel about her leaving?
4. Was Lore a brave person? Why or why not?

## Writing Assignment:

Students are to write how they would feel and react if they had to be taken from their homes. Some students may choose to write about a real situation if they have been taken from their homes or from one parent because of divorce. This assignment may be too emotional for some students, so I advise teachers to work closely with the students and discuss their topics. The stories should be read aloud.

## Lesson Plan IV

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### **Objectives: To recognize the importance of self**

To understand the Mexican and Puerto-Rican family structures

### **Procedure: Read “On The Edge Of The Barrio” and “Puerto-Rican Paradise”**

**Vocabulary:** Some of the words are used in our language, but they are of Spanish origin.

serape  
pinata  
sombrero  
tortilla  
tacos

The teacher should have students look up other words that are common in our language but are from Spanish origin.

I decided to combine the two short stories into one lesson because they both have similar characteristics. Both stories discuss Spanish immigrants and the hardships placed on the families, and they both discuss a want for a better life. Also, students who have lived in Puerto Rico can give additional information about their native homeland and the lives they lead. Since there is a big Puerto-Rican population in New Haven, these two



stories will be of great interest to the students.

### **Writing Assignment:**

#### **“On The Edge Of The Barrio”**

This story relates a hard struggle but a very successful ending. Students are to write about a time in their lives when they felt that the cards were stacked against them, but in the end they were successful. Students may write about making the winning touchdown, passing a very hard test, getting a job for which they and many others applied, etc. . . . The stories should be shared with the class.

#### **“Puerto-Rican Paradise”**

Since this story focuses on the change of environments and the father, students are to write two papers. First they should write about a change that occurred in their lives. The change could be moving from one place to another, changing from junior high to high school, changing jobs, etc. . . . In the second paper, they should write about the unique qualities their father possesses. The papers on the fathers will turn out to be humorous at times, because when students compare their stories they might find that some of the qualities that their fathers possess are not unique to their fathers alone.

## **Fun Activity**

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If time allows, students should put together a personality bag. The bag should include about ten items that reflect the student's personality and culture. For example, if a student was Jewish, the student would put a bagel into the bag. The bagel would represent the student's culture and it would represent that the student liked to eat bagels. The bags should be presented orally to the class, and the student should explain the items in the bag. This fun activity will give students additional information about their classmates and their classmates' cultures. Also, students may find that they have much in common with different cultures.

## **Note**

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Arna Bontemps, ed. *American Negro Poetry* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), p. 204.

## **Student Bibliography**

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McFarland, Philip and Feagin, Francis. *Focus on Literature: Forms*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1981.

This book is an anthology of many short stories and it includes a section of autobiographical short stories used in this unit. All the short stories except “Puerto-Rican Paradise” are found in this book.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Focus on Literature: Viewpoints*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1981.

This book is an anthology of many short stories and it includes a section of autobiographical short stories of

which “Puerto-Rican Paradise” was chosen.

## Teacher Bibliography

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Buscaglia, Leo. *Living, Loving, and Learning* . New York, New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1982.

Although the whole book does not have much to do with my unit, it does give tips on how to unite some aspects of life into the learning process.

Greenberg, Herbert M. *Teaching With Feeling* . Toronto, Canada: The Macmillan Co., 1969.

This book gives teachers tips about teaching with sincerity.

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