



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

Finding Yourself Through Autobiography

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by Patrick A. Velardi

I Introduction

"I can't think of anything to write. Besides, nothing exciting ever happens to me." Words that send shivers down the spine of any sixth grade English teacher who is trying to encourage his students to think exactly the opposite. Trying to convince young people that writing is talking on paper, speaking in their own voice with a pencil, communicating with each other non-verbally, is an enormous task. How can the teacher convince the students that they are important enough to write about? When I was mulling over this question in preparation for my unit I thought that perhaps if students could read the writings of individuals whom they know and admire, the students will begin to see that writing about themselves is worthwhile and important, and will help them become better writers.

I learn a lot from watching my children. I have two sons who become walking, talking, breathing statistics books every spring. They study the backs of hundreds of baseball cards and assimilate vast amounts of knowledge that they are able to spout, chapter and verse, at the drop of a fly ball. Would that they could remember algebraic functions with such ease and relish. Why one set of facts and figures and not another is the question I ask myself. As a teacher, I have often wondered what great things could be accomplished if I could inspire the same fervor when teaching parts of speech, or when reading a short story by Nathaniel Hawthorne. Young people, and many adults, are totally fascinated with the lives of the famous. How can I capture some of this energy and direct it toward other areas of literature? This is the question that I hope to answer in my unit.

By reading excerpts from the autobiography of Dave Winfield I hope to open up an avenue of self-expression for my students. As a public school teacher, I have learned that the hardest part of the struggle to open minds is grabbing and holding the attention of students. I must do the first if I want to accomplish my goal of teaching students how to write about themselves in an effective and satisfying manner. I want to use the universal appeal of sports personalities to get where I want to go. While the initial emphasis will be on reading autobiographies, I want to progress to teaching students how they, too, have valuable experiences that are gratifying to write about.

As I sit and think, and observe my sons and my students, I gain confidence that a unit of the type I propose will be a useful tool in getting the young people in my class to write about themselves in a way they haven't done before. But I can't leave it there. After my class has had a taste of the "rich and famous," I want to move

them to reading about the not so rich and famous who write powerfully about their lives, and then have my class progress to gaining the satisfaction and pleasure of writing about their own experiences. Two books I plan to use are *Sister* , by Eloise Greenfield, and *A Gathering of Days* by Joan W. Blos. Both books are marvelous examples of young people coping with experiences that students in my class will have also experienced. These books will help develop a sense of empathy that I feel will be most productive in eliciting personal writing from my students. From 1830, *A Gathering of Days* , to 1988, *Winfield* , with *Sister* in between, covers a lot of ground, but together all three works will provide valuable insights into my students' own lives, and provide the inspiration they need to write more freely about themselves.

II Why Autobiography

The teaching of writing is an intricate endeavor. Many lessons in textbooks attempt to give students techniques for organization as well as proper form, and they attempt to offer ideas for the beginning of the task. A lesson may offer detail charts as a method of organization and give examples of using such a chart. It works well with young writers so long as they are using the book's ideas. When it is the students' turn to originate, then the difficulty arises. What good is the chart if the student has difficulty deciding on the initial idea? He cannot organize what he doesn't have.

Autobiography is a natural approach to overcoming this uncomfortable situation of where ideas come from. We as teachers do similar things in the teaching of reading by having our students recognize main ideas and topic sentences, but we do much less in getting students to originate them. Leo Ruth (1987) talks about this in an interesting and informative article. He says that children must have the opportunity to share their own life experiences, to write about personal knowledge and to recognize themselves as the author if they are to develop their own thinking abilities. In the same article, Ruth makes a point that all of us teachers need to remember. Children need to see us as "a helpful collaborator, rather than as a stern evaluator." The teacher's efforts need to be spent during the writing, not after, in the correcting process. Ruth continues by suggesting that children need to learn to "plan ahead over a sequence of sentences rather than think just one clause at a time." Finally Ruth tells us that students should develop a "sense of authorship" both as a writer creating meaning and as a reader creating meanings within the realm of his own life.

My own security about using more autobiography in my classroom was strengthened by an article by Roni Natov (1986). The author talks about recent autobiographical fiction for children. The selections are realistic and adhere to the truth, but shape it into a "vision that can inspire others." These stories can help children affirm their own sense of reality by finding similarities and differences between their own lives and the lives of the stories' protagonists. Children can begin to find their own uniqueness and separate themselves from family and society without totally and permanently disavowing either. They begin to realize more clearly that they are part of a network of people, but also unique individuals. Thus, by reading autobiographies written by extraordinary people, (in my unit, a famous sports personality), students can recognize their own individuality. Further, by reading a book such as *Sister* , students can observe how they, too, have experienced similar events, and can recognize qualities they share with characters, or qualities they have but characters don't, and have their identity more clearly defined. Once the students understand themselves more clearly, then writing about themselves should come more easily.

What may be the most important quality about reading autobiography and about writing autobiographically is that it allows us teachers to make writing personal for our students. In her book, *The Art of Teaching Writing* , Lucy Calkins reminds us all of this critical point. We as teachers need to listen to our students and teach them to listen to themselves. By reading autobiography we help students understand "self" more clearly. They begin to value their uniqueness more highly. Hopefully we can transfer the more clearly defined sense of self

into a greater sense of value for their own life experiences and have them see their own lives as worth writing about. In turn we give them a valuable tool to use to get them started writing, not just for the length of a class period, or a homework assignment, but for life. As Calkins says in her book, “we give them ownership and responsibility for their writing.” When this truly occurs, we teachers can serve as guides, and writing becomes an enjoyable experience for children.

III Why Baseball

I don't mean to suggest that I've done the research, but I'd be surprised if any other sport has generated the number of books that baseball has. (18 by Yankees, alone.) Its universal appeal has taken it from the realm of the sports pages to the height of fine literature. When I read essays by Roger Angell in *New Yorker Magazine* I sense more than just simple reporting about a game. Baseball is a game that has inspired one of my favorite modern-day myths, *The Natural*, by Bernard Malamud. When a respected book reviewer for “The New York Times,” Christopher Lehmann-Haupt, takes a year to follow baseball from spring training to post-season play, and writes a marvelous book, *Me and DiMaggio, A Baseball Fan Goes in Search of His Gods*, surely there's more than a game involved. Perhaps it is the fact that a respected poet writes a fascinating essay in “The New York Times Book Review” on a poem about baseball, that tells us that there is more to baseball than there immediately appears to be. Donald Hall is talking about something deeper than just the words in Ernest Lawrence Thayer's “Casey at the Bat,” written on June 3rd, 1888, and alive and well in June, 1988. Finally, I guess it's spring. I have been a fan since I was the age of my students today, and I'm sure I will remain a fan forever, despite the multi-million dollar contracts, the unruly behavior of players, managers and yes, even umpires. I imagine that any sport will work for my unit, but there is only one America's game.

IV Winfield

Which autobiography to use? There are so many, and so as a criterion I used my own childhood, (and adulthood), preference for the New York Yankees and chose Dave Winfield's life story. I have no intention of having students read the entire book. My purpose in using a celebrity autobiography is not for its content so much as for inspiration for my students to begin writing more freely about themselves. Therefore, by choosing excerpts from the book, I can direct my students to areas of this famous person's life that may closely parallel their own.

There are several sections of the Winfield autobiography that I want to use as inspiration to build a succession of writing exercises. In the section titled “Family,” Winfield gives information about his background. It's fairly basic, and there aren't many value judgments made. The straightforwardness of the writing serves as encouragement for a young writer to open the door to his personality. The passage from the book presents a fairly ordinary childhood that should not intimidate a young reader/writer. After we read the excerpt in class, we will model our own autobiographies from it.

Another section, labeled “Fears” has Winfield talking about memories of early events in his life that left longlasting impressions on him. Arguments among siblings are usually fertile ground from which to elicit vivid descriptions from adolescents. Early in Winfield's book there is depicted a disagreement between Dave and his brother Steve. The scene sounds like any that would occur in a family, particularly a family that has two boys fairly close in age. Sibling rivalries often escalate from insignificant words or actions to emotional tugs of war and even physical confrontation. Reading about a scene such as this will cause the students to recall similar situations in their own lives, and from there they will write about them.

V Sister

Once students have had a chance to read about someone famous relating everyday occurrences in his life with fondness and a sense of importance, they will begin to look at their own experiences with respect. A danger I must avoid is having a student feel that what happens to a famous person is more important than what happens to him. A million people may not want to read a student's journal, but the journal's importance to him is not thereby diminished. The teacher's objective must be to stress that fact at all times. To emphasize that autobiographical writing of "ordinary" people is valuable, I want to use the book *Sister*, by Eloise Greenfield. The story is about Doretha, a nine year old who has started "a sort of diary." The book is divided into sections that would begin "Me, Age ." Throughout the book the emphasis of the story is on Doretha's reactions to some commonplace and some quite unsettling and serious situations. The reader is taken through a wide range of emotions, but always is reminded of the power of Doretha's writing it down in her diary and how effective the diary becomes in helping her understand her situation. The book will provide excellent reading to help students understand autobiography better, and will be a wealth of material for class discussions and writing experiences for the students.

VI A Gathering of Days

A third source of both good reading and good inspiration for writing is Joan W. Blos' fictionalized journal, *A Gathering of Days*. The book presents a young girl who lived in the early nineteenth century and who must cope with life in those times. However, it also presents the main character, Catherine, in universal situations that children of any time period can empathize with. Foremost of these situations is the death of her mother following the birth of her baby brother. At fourteen, Catherine's position in the family is drastically changed, and to further complicate matters, her father decides to remarry. The book is written in journal form and almost any of the daily entries could be used as stimulation for writing. The writing can be short pieces in which, perhaps, students relate to Catherine's relationship with her best friends. Also, the book demonstrates how valuable a journal can be over a long period of time. This is evidenced at the beginning of the book in a letter from the keeper of the journal to her great-granddaughter, also named Catherine, bequeathing the writings to her young namesake. Students today could, perhaps, do their own autobiographies imagining themselves as eighty year old great-grandparents doing what the letter suggests. What happened in their lives, imagining themselves looking back? What events would they be likely to remember? How many events would they be likely to remember at all if they had not kept a journal? I believe that the book will perform very well for my students, both as good reading and good inspiration and that is what this unit is all about.

Lesson Plans

I Journals

Student journals have become a regular part of my classroom exercises, as I am sure they have become part of many teachers' classrooms. Indeed, I have of late encountered reactions from students stating, "Oh, we did journals in Ms. So and So's room." Of course, that does not eliminate the importance of journals in my class, but it does keep me alert for ideas to vary the basic format of daily journal entries. The daily journal is essential for developing the students' sense of self, and, for those students who want to share, a sense of camaraderie and empathy for one another. Incidentally, it is rarer in my experience for a student to not want to share his writing but those private entries do occur, and it is elementary good taste to respect a student's wishes. However, it is also important to point out to students at the outset that I, as their teacher, will be

reading all journals on a regular basis. While reading in preparation for this unit, I came across an article by Maurice J. O’Sullivan entitled “The Group Journal,” and it struck me as an idea that might help me get my students to view journals in a different light. The article describes a journalistic process in which the writing is a group project and students shared a single journal. Through trial and error Mr. O’Sullivan found that keeping the group journal in an easily available central location worked best. His students wrote their entries on the odd-numbered pages, and the even-numbered pages were reserved for responses. Furthermore, O’Sullivan found that he had an open journal where students were free to write whatever they would, and a group project in which topics were suggested by him and students were allowed to respond in the journal rather than in class. In the group projects in O’Sullivan’s classes, students actually wrote novels, and he felt that the group project, as well as the open journal provided a valuable vent for reluctant or less imaginative students.

O’Sullivan is using group journals for college students, but I believe I can adapt the idea for middle school students. As previously stated, I find it usual to have students want to share their journal writing. The group journal seems an ideal vehicle for allowing entries that are meant to be shared and reacted to in writing. The open journal idea speaks for itself as a means of getting students involved in writing. For middle school students parameters of good taste would have to be firmly set and clearly understood before embarking on the project. Once begun, the open journal, with its page for entries and its page for responses, should generate energetic writing by a class. A single spiral notebook, kept where students have easy access would facilitate the writing. Time set aside in class for the open journal may be necessary, but ideally a student should feel free to write in the notebook when other classroom assignments are completed.

The group project journal can be used as a means of getting additional feedback from students as we are reading the selections from this unit. Here I speculate, but after reading a section of Dave Winfield’s book that talks about a childhood trauma, students will want to write about accidents or close calls they have had, and that they want to share. The students will have their private journals for anything that they would prefer to keep private, the open journal for anything they want to share and the group project to react specifically about the reading going on in class at that time. The open journal and the group project give a different slant to an excellent idea, journal writing, that may lose some of its appeal through overuse.

II Interviewing

I have used interviewing as a writing exercise in my classes many times, and I feel there are several aspects of interviewing that appeal to students. First of all, the students enjoy the increased freedom of being able to “talk” to each other, so immediately they are more relaxed than in a more formal classroom activity. Secondly, the students really enjoy the role playing in an interviewing exercise. We work in pairs, and each member of a pair takes on the role of interviewer and then interviewee. At times students are asked to assume the role of a famous individual in history, or a well known personality, and proceed with the interview as that person. By assuming the personality of someone else, a student may get new insights into the chosen person, and begin to develop a better sense of empathy. Thirdly, through interviewing exercises students can just talk and write about themselves in a friendly and relaxed manner. Usually interviewing exercises are marvelous icebreakers at the beginning of the school year, as well as a means of getting to know each other better.

In this unit I hope to develop the interviewing skills of my students, and develop a sense of autobiography that arises from interviewing. With this in mind, and in keeping with my initial emphasis on baseball, I want to have the students read an interview taken from the book, *Me and DiMaggio, A Baseball Fan Goes in Search of His Gods* by Christopher Lehmann-Haupt (Pages 66-72). In this excerpt the writer, Lehmann-Haupt, is interviewing the baseball player, Rod Carew. Initially, Lehmann-Haupt is nervous and tense about approaching the star and

we, the readers, get a feeling of Lehmann-Haupt's personality, fears and uncertainties about what he is doing. It is a very insightful piece of writing which is then followed by the actual question and answer segment in which Lehmann-Haupt blunders along seeming to antagonize Carew, more than to draw him out. What follows the interview is what I found, (and I hope to get my students to also find), to be the most revealing about the interviewing process, even on a professional level. Lehmann-Haupt analyzes his own interviewing techniques, pointing out where he feels he made mistakes. Slowly we, the readers, see Lehmann-Haupt come around from the position of feeling inept because the interview didn't go well, to recognizing the shortcomings in Rod Carew's attitude that made the interview less than it should have been. We see the initial lack of confidence on Lehmann-Haupt's part develop into a newly found certainty that he had done the interview well. The whole incident becomes a wonderful autobiographical insight into the interviewer himself, Students should be able to see that we can learn something about ourselves from interviewing, as well as learning about the person being interviewed, The kinds of questions asked reveal something about the person asking the questions, and in this sense interviewing becomes an exercise in autobiography as well as biography.

Students must learn some of the basics of interviewing in order to make this exercise beneficial. They must first learn that preparation is an essential ingredient to the successful interview. I usually begin by reviewing some stock questions such as the following:

1. Where did you live as a child?
2. What was your neighborhood like?
3. Who were the most important people to you in your childhood?
4. What are your hobbies?
5. What do you hope to accomplish?

From this point the interviewer can ask questions that he feels would be important to him to know about the interviewee. As a follow-up writing activity students would then compose the data from the interview into a story, newspaper article or even a fictionalized account using the facts of the interview as the basis. They should begin with what they feel is the most important part of the interviewee's story, and develop their writing from there. Sharing each other's final product, and trying to match stories to the person in the classroom will emphasize the autobiographical flavor of the entire exercise.

III Retrospective Autobiographies

I first came across the idea of retrospective autobiographies in an article titled "Retrospective Autobiographies as a Teaching Tool" by Kim M. King. In the article, King is talking about the technique as it is used in a sociology class in college to get information about students. The information ranged from career choices to the number of children desired, and was used in a variety of ways in the classroom. I made a connection with retrospective autobiographies and the book *A Gathering of Days* because of the letter at the beginning of that book. The letter is from the writer of the ensuing journal to her great-granddaughter, both of whom share the name Catherine. Why not introduce both the book and the importance of personal writing in a journal with a writing exercise in retrospective autobiography?

To begin, the teacher would set up the situation with an introductory talk, lecture, or written paragraph that would say something along the lines of, "You are now 80 years old and you are writing a letter to your great-grandson/ daughter. What are your favorite memories? What did you do that you are proud of? What would

you have liked to have done, but never did? What happened to your family and friends? What are happy and sad things that have happened to you?" If I can be allowed the liberty of anticipating student responses, I foresee sentences written in answer to the lead questions, and as a first draft, this will be an excellent start. Following up, the students can then revise and edit their initial responses and develop the information into a story about themselves. This next writing will help students recognize what is important to them, and hopefully help to develop a sense of self, and a sense of family, which is the aim of our autobiographical reading and writing exercises. The retrospective autobiography will also emphasize why journal writing is so essential in helping us remember what is important in our lives, not only events, but emotions and feelings, reactions to people, and relationships among people. Many of the retrospective autobiographies will likely be very general, and might even be responses that students think that the teacher wants to hear. For this reason the need to keep an account becomes more apparent. As we read the book, and see the generalities of the initial letter fill out in beautiful detail, the value of journals becomes clear. In the end, a retrospective autobiography will have served two very beneficial lessons.

IV Putting it All Together

The book, *Sister*, by Eloise Greenfield, is a wonderfully moving account of a thirteen year old who is spurred into reading a journal that she has kept for the previous four years by the sudden departure of her older sister. Doretha, the main character, feels some responsibility for her sister Alberta's leaving, although there are many factors which have been leading up to it. Doretha's journal provides her with the details she needs to help her remember those factors, and in so doing, help her to get the perspective she needs to deal with the emotional upheaval she is experiencing. The book is a marvelous reinforcement of all the reasons teachers give to convince students why writing about ourselves on a regular basis can be so important. Furthermore, the writing is strikingly real. *Sister* is written in the third person and reads like a story, rather than a diary. Because of that fact, it is a good counterpoint to *A Gathering of Days* in which the story emerges from the first person narrative. Dialogue in *Sister* helps move it along in a natural, comfortable fashion, and for no other reason than its magnificent story, it is an extremely worthwhile book to read.

How to use the book, *Sister* in this unit is the question. Besides the previously mentioned value the book has as a reaffirmation of all the good things a journal does for its writer, and other than the intrinsic value of the book as good literature, what kind of writing can a book like *Sister* help students learn? After reading excerpts from *Winfield*, an example of an "I was born . . ." autobiography, and *A Gathering of Days*, a journal, *Sister* demonstrates perfectly in the next step for my students. Not all of us will become famous, but all of us have a story to tell. The writing I want to work on with students after our journals, autobiographies, and interviews have been practiced is the creative story-writing using their own experiences as fodder. The book *Sister* would be read and discussed in class, and since the book is neatly divided into sections that are short stories in and of themselves, students will practice writing stories based on sections of journals, whether the source is their private journals, the open journals or the group, journals. In these student stories we will work on third person narrative and dialogue in the mode of *Sister*. The students' sense of self will transform into a creative process with a source that has a rich past, a continuing present and an endless future.

Concluding Thoughts

Throughout this paper an attempt has been made to give students a better sense of autobiography and to open up an avenue of inspiration for writing. Samples of autobiographical writing are presented for their own value as good reading and for helping students to recognize the value in their own life experiences as source material for their own writing. By building from reading *Winfield*, one of the “rich and famous,” to the story of Doretha in *Sister*, who is “one of us” a person who learns how to deal with difficult situations from her own writing, students can learn about and then practice using a tool that will serve them well. Primarily the focus is on improving reading and writing skills, but, risking the danger of pretentiousness, it must be said that there is more to this unit than just that. Young people, indeed all people, need the positive feelings gained from self-reflection and empathy with others, whether the others are family, classmates or co-workers. In the end, if students learn this lesson, then their time will be well spent.

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