



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1990 Volume I: The Autobiographical Mode in Latin American Literature

Learning Through Autobiographical Situations

Curriculum Unit 90.01.03
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As a special education teacher, I teach reading as a separate subject. I am always trying to think of new and exciting ways to teach the children reading skills. Since most of my students are Spanish speaking, this unit will concentrate on stories by Latin American authors.

The unit will promote an understanding of Latin American cultures by introducing the students to Latin American autobiographies. The information provided by these readings will give our students an understanding and appreciation of the history, the people, and the social and economical problems of that culture.

A series of questions will be raised to stimulate students to record remembrances of the life of someone in their household (grandmother, etc.). The questions will cover the personal and public, work and home, family and community aspect of a person's life. This will serve as a guide to capture the significant facts and events of each child's family. The facts gathered will easily generate an oral history of a grandmother, etc.

The stories created by the students will be used to teach reading. These stories will stem from the selections of the autobiographies that I will read in class. In addition to their stories, parts of the autobiographies selected will be paraphrased to meet the student's reading level in order for them to read, discuss, and write about in group activities.

The literature presented in this unit will allow the students to gain knowledge of that part of the world— Latin America. Guided discussions can supply the students with information on the history and culture of the countries discussed.

One of the advantages of participating in a literature program is that it can instill in students a desire to read on their own. Using literature of interest to the students will develop their language skills, thus improving their English.

Since reading for meaning develops many literacy related abilities, this unit will make an impact on academic success by engaging children in activities that stimulate their thinking and widen their intellectual horizons.

As a final activity, the students will be asked to compare two autobiographies that they have read or that the teacher has read to them. They will also compare their own lives with that of the authors. They will find similarities, differences, and generalities.

Since most of the students are from Puerto Rico, one of the authors will be Puerto Rican. The children will be able to relate to his/her situations and tell how his/her life has been similar to their own.

The students will write their own autobiographies as well as biographies using their relatives as subjects.

Throughout the lessons the teacher will use the whole language strategies to obtain the objectives. The characteristics of a whole language strategy is a language situation that is student-focused, process-oriented, and links many language processes: listening, speaking, reading, writing, drama, interpretation through arts, thinking and problem solving.

The literature will relate to the student's real life experiences. The lessons will lead into turning our students to authors themselves. He/She will have control of how to begin, which information to use, how detailed the events will be, and when to end.

Listening and reading will be demonstrated when the story is read by the teacher, and by the student. With this, dramatization also takes place. For example, they can role play to depict the characters from the autobiographies. Role playing situations can develop the student's comprehension of personality traits of particular characters.

The unit will allow the students to listen to quality literature at least once a day. As the unit develops, the lessons will link listening, speaking, reading, writing, thinking, and problem solving for elementary students in grades three and four.

The objectives for this unit are:

1. To introduce students to Latin-American autobiographies
2. To help the students understand their own culture and learn about others as well
3. To introduce the student to different styles used when writing autobiographies
4. To foster an appreciation for their own lives by writing their own autobiography, as well as a biography of a family member.

Background Information on the Autobiographies That Will Be Used for this Unit

"Hunger of Memory The Education of Richard Rodriguez"

Richard Rodriguez was once a 'Socially disadvantaged' child... a rather happy child....a childhood of intense family closeness. However, thirty years later he writes this book as an assimilated middle-class American man.

As a student, he was always a classmate to children of rich parents. He is a writer who writes against affirmative action and bilingual education.

His autobiography tells the story of the scholarship boy who returns home one summer from college to discover bewildering silence, facing his parents. He considers himself a comic victim of two cultures.

Education has altered his life. He writes the history of his schooling, years as a student, of losses, of gains. He wrote his life story because he felt his life deserved public notice the life of a middle-class man.

(This autobiography will represent the Mexican-American.)

“I, Rigoberta Menchu-An Indian Woman in Guatemala”

Rigoberta has a mission....she wants the readers of her autobiography to understand and react.

A member of one of twenty-two ethnic groups in Guatemala, she tells her story in Spanish, a language she has spoken for only three years. Her life story is an account of contemporary history rather than Guatemala itself. She speaks of all the Indians of the American continent. Her thoughts and descriptions of her relationship with nature, life, and her community can be those of the Indians of North America, Central America and South America.

She reveals to the reader the culture discrimination she has suffered. Her voice allows the defeated to speak. She has survived the genocide that destroyed her family and community. With this book, she refuses to let us forget. Words become her only weapon against her oppressors. Her story provides us with detailed descriptions of ceremonies and rituals allowing us to learn about her culture. She travels back in time, reliving wonderful as well as dreadful moments.

Her main purpose is to have the reader hear about a culture of which she is extremely proud and which she wants to have recognized.

“Memoirs of Bernardo Vega—A Contribution To The History of The Puerto Rican Community in New York”

Bernardo Vega was born in Puerto Rico in 1885. As a cigar worker (tabaquero) he belonged to the most educated and politically advanced sector of the Puerto Rican working class. He realized at an early age that the workers’ struggle needed to be directed not only at the local bosses and colonial elite on the island, but at the whole system of imperialist exploitation based in the United States

In his memoirs, Vega describes a life story recounting the adventures of a unique yet representative pioneer among Puerto Rican migrants. These memoirs have been valuable to the Puerto Rican movement in the States as well as in Puerto Rico. They represent the struggle of the Puerto Rican both socially and politically in New York from the turn of the century.

The book is a hidden treasure of historical data concerning the leaders from Cuba and Puerto Rico during a time when these revolutionary leaders met to plot their next steps against Spanish colonial rule.

The book offers the millions of Puerto Ricans in the United States identifiable life experiences that can be recaptured and used to strike out against the present existing problems.

My unit will begin with page three from *Memoirs of Bernardo Vega: A Contribution To The History of The Puerto Rican Community In New York* .

The selection will be restated to insure student understanding and easy reading as follows:

FROM MY HOMETOWN CAYEY TO SAN JUAN1

I left Cayey early in the morning of August 2, 1916. I was very sad. I was leaving a girlfriend in town. I don't write about this love. Confessions of love bore me to death, especially my own. Anyway, I left Cayey that hot summer ready to face a new life. I had never been out of Puerto Rico before. Sure, I had visited the capital of Puerto Rico, but this was the first time I have left the shores of Puerto Rico. This meant going far away. It meant going to a distant and strange world. I did not know what to expect. I was white. I was a peasant from the highlands (a jibaro). My family were country folks. I had a round face with high cheekbones. I had a wide, flat nose, and small blue eyes. My lips were sensual. I had strong, straight teeth. I had a full head of chestnut hair. I had square jaws. I was rather ugly. However, some women found me attractive.

The selection "From my hometown Cayey to San Juan" will immediately capture their attention because many of the students are from Puerto Rico and have lived in New York as well (as Vega did).

The selection from this autobiography will be read by the teacher. It will be displayed to the class on an overhead projector line by line as the teacher reads. This will focus on each word pronounced. After the reading, the students will be asked to read sections as well. The students will then be divided into groups to discuss what they have read. They will be given a list of questions they can answer together to get them started.

Questions for Students

1. Where was Vega from?
2. Where was he going?
3. Why did he leave?
4. What does 'jibaro' mean?
5. How do Puerto Ricans define 'jibaro' today?
6. How did Vega feel?
7. How did you feel when you arrived at the "mainland"?
8. List the differences between Puerto Rico and Connecticut.

By dividing students into groups, they will work together thus, the exercises will serve as a powerful tool to develop their oral language skills.

This type of activity can be utilized on a daily basis. By reading this literature at least once a day, the children can acquire the necessary information to discuss the content within their groups. The teacher can select any reading from the autobiographies mentioned in this unit and adapt to the individual classroom. The selections should be read aloud by the teacher first, and then by the students: once for explanation, vocabulary and understanding, and once for feeling and the meaning behind the autobiography.

In addition to Bernardo Vega, I have chosen the autobiography of Richard Rodriguez.

One of the selections I will read appears on page 12 and 13.* You can use the material as it is or you can restate the information to satisfy your student's needs.

After reading the selection, the students will again divide into groups. The students will be asked to compare the differences they see in the style of the actual writing of the autobiographies. They will be asked to compare the characters Vega and Rodriguez. This will again encourage children to discuss among themselves, thus enhancing their oral vocabulary.

The teacher can regroup the students into one large group, so she can further explain the different cultures of the two men and encourage the class to ask questions about the two men: one from Puerto Rico and other from Mexico.

From the readings, the teacher can build a language experience activity. After discussing personal experiences that the students have had when they left their hometowns, the teacher can list these on a flip chart. The teacher will encourage the students to write stories of their own lives. As a result, the children learns to read by reading the real literature that is being used to supplement the basal. They also learn to read by writing.

In order to facilitate the students' initial writings, the teacher may devise a form for the students' use.

The student will select an event and a person that was special to them during those events.

For example: I felt _____ when _____
_____ helped me by _____
_____.

The writing activity may take many forms and used to learn many skills. The following format may also be used by the students.

THINK SHEET: Clustering Details of the Event

1. Picture yourself in the situation.
2. Ask yourself each question below, beginning with I.
3. Write as many single words or brief phrases as you can in response.
4. Your short answers should remind you of more than you have actually put on paper.

REMEMBERING SOMEONE SPECIAL

- A. What's making me feel this way?
- B. Where am I?
- C. What is the event or situation?
- D. What feelings do I have?
- E. What do I need or want?

*Pages 12 and 13 will be available with this unit at the Yale-New Haven Teacher Institute office.

F. Who helps me?

G. What does this person do?

H. How do I feel about him or her now?

Notes

1. Iglesias, Cesar Andrew. *Memoirs of Bernardo Vega-A Contribution To The History of The Puerto Rican Community In New York* . Translated from Spanish by Juan Flores. Monthly Review Press. 1984.

TEACHERS' BIBLIOGRAPHY

Burgos-Debray. *I, Rigoberta Menchu An Indian Woman in Guatemala* . Translated by Ann Wright. Verso and NLB, London, UK. 1984.

This book reflects the different influences on Rigoberta's life. It tells the life of a Quiche Indian woman who is a member of one of the largest of the twenty-two ethnic groups in Guatemala. Her autobiography which was translated from Spanish by Ann Wright reveals that Rigoberta wants the reader to understand and react. It is an account of contemporary history rather than of Guatemala, itself. It is an account of all the Indians of the American continent.

You will understand as you read, that words are her only weapon against injustice. The book is revealing as well as shocking.

Iglesias, Cesar Andreu. *Memoirs of Bernardo Vega - A Contribution To The History of the Puerto Rican Community In New York* . Translated by Juan Flores. Monthly Review Press. 1984.

This is a great book to read, if you are curious about the Puerto Rican community in New York from 1916 to the aftermath of World War II. The book contains the most detailed and politically coherent account of Puerto Rican life in New York during this period. It demonstrates that Puerto Ricans are by no means "newcomers" to the United States.

It can be used as a resource for history classes. It is a hidden treasure of rare glimpses going back to the late nineteenth-century Caribbean, a time when Cuban and Puerto Rican revolutionary leaders converged in New York to plot their next steps against Spanish colonial rule. I found it 'fascinating'.

Neruda, Pablo. *Neruda Memoirs confieso que he vivido*— Translated from Spanish by Farrar, Strauss and Giroux Inc. 1977.

This book was written by a 20th-century Nobel prize winner poet from Chile, Neruda. He writes his life from the lives of the poet. Much of the book is expressed by using poetry in prose—which appears to set the tone for what is ahead. The pages come alive with descriptions of the country...as only a poet can do. Throughout the book, Neruda reconstructs the years that are now so far away by immersing himself in memories.

Rodriguez, Richard. *Hunger of Memory The Education of Richard Rodriguez* . Bantam Book, Inc. New York, New York. 1983.

You will enjoy this wonderful autobiographical essay. Rodriguez offers himself as an example of the long labor of change, as a victim of two cultures (Mexican/ American). It is a history of his schooling. As he speaks of his humble past, he reminds himself of his separation from the past by bringing memory to silence He remembers what was grievously lost to define what was necessarily gained.

Tiedt, Pamela and Tiedt, Iris. *Multi-cultural Teaching: A Handbook of Activities, Information, and Resources* . Allyn and Bacon, Inc. Boston Mass. 1979.

This handbook offers teachers ideas that enable you to promote understanding in the classroom through varied learning experiences focusing on language and culture.

STUDENTS' BIBLIOGRAPHY

I chose the following biographies of American Women written by the same author because they are easy to read, and each book has less than forty pages.

In addition, the persons that the story is about represent different ethnic groups (Mexican, Puerto Rican, American Indian, Black, and Chinese, etc.).

Brief Summary of the following books: Each book is a brief biography of women from different ethnic groups that reached their career goals.

They overcame difficulties and personal tragedies to become renowned scientists in different areas.

Verheyden-Hilliard, Mary Ellen. *Scientist With Determination, Elma Gonzalez* . The Equity Institute. 1985.

Verheyden-Hilliard, Mary Ellen. *Scientist from Puerto Rico, Maria Cordero Hardy* . The Equity Institute. 1985.

Verheyden-Hilliard, Mary Ellen. *Scientist and Governor, Dixy Lee Ray* . The Equity Institute. 1985.

Verheyden-Hilliard, Mary Ellen. *Scientist and Puzzle Solver , Constance Tom Noguchi* . The Equity Institute. 1985.

Verheyden-Hilliard, Mary Ellen. *Engineer From The Comanche Nation, Nancy Wallace* . The Equity Institute. 1985.

Verheyden-Hilliard, Mary Ellen, *Scientist and Planner, Ru Chilt Cheo Huan* . The Equity Institute. 1985.

Verheyden-Hilliard, Mary Ellen, *Mathematician and Administrator, Shirley Mathis McBay* . The Equity Institute.

1985.

Verheyden-Hilliard, Mary Ellen. *Scientist From The Santa Clara Pueblo, Aqnes Naranjo Stroud-Lee* . The Equity Institute. 1985.

I chose the following book as a representation of autobiographical situations.

Crossen, Stacy Jo and Covell, Natalie Ann. *Me Is How I Feel: Poems* . The McCall Publishing Company, New York, New York. 1970.

This delightful book of poems has been developed with the help of children. It is an ideal book for this unit because it uses poems to describe situations and feelings that are experienced by, but are often problematic to children. One way to use these poems is to read one to the class and then let them react individually or in groups to the idea that has been presented.

The illustrations in the book complement the feeling that is reflected in each poem.

Before reading a selection, you may ask your students to close their eyes and sit very still for just a minute. Suggest that they remember situations in their homes that made them feel happy, sad, confused, scared, or furious. The students will become better able to understand and thus deal with not only their positive but also negative feelings.

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