



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
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A Cultural Journalist's View of City Life

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A reporter writes when, where, why and how an event happened. Generally speaking we read what a reporter has to say in the daily newspaper. We are told the facts about fires, murders, car accidents, births and deaths. A cultural journalist, on the other hand, explores events within his culture. He or she examines the cultural, societal and community context in which a broad range of things happen. A cultural journalist explores currents within society, and draws conclusions. Cultural Journalism is an examination of ourselves. It is also about traditions: identifying them, writing about them and keeping them alive. The term, as least to my knowledge, was coined by Eliot Wigginton, a High School English teacher, teaching in rural Georgia. Unable to reach his students in the standard academic ways, discovered a wealth of interest in local history and traditions. He seized on this interest as a way to engage his students in writing and in life. He told them to go out into the community, into the mountains, and find the folklore, the people, the special places and write about them. His idea took off so well, that the students published their findings in their first school newspaper. That paper did so well, it was published as a series of books entitled "The Foxfire Books." Those books then went on to be memorialized in a Broadway play starring Jessica Tandy and Hume Cronyn. The goal of my curriculum unit is to develop a course in cultural journalism that concentrates on city life, an urban version of "Foxfire." This curriculum would be appropriate for students in grades 10-12. I intend to divide the class into six parts, (neighborhoods, poverty, crime, jobs, architecture, anti cultural diversity), each of which will include selected readings, writing assignments, and field trips. I plan to spend one to two weeks on each section, thereby making an eight week curriculum, the length of a marking period at High School in the Community. An additional goal is to provide my students with a sociological view of cities, and an architectural view. It is also my hope to make them more sensitive to the socioeconomic and ethnic divisions in cities. In this way they will have a better understanding of the forces that shape them and the city they live in. I have chosen a wide variety of readings for my curriculum unit so that I will be able to expose my students to many different kinds of information about the city they live in and cities in general. By reading selections from the list I have chosen, primarily from the an anthology entitled "The Little, Brown Reader," students will see how great writers have written about city life. These readings will help prepare my students for a series of interviews and other writing assignments that we will do in journalism class. The interviews will take place in many different locations around New Haven, including the Yale campus, senior citizen centers, other schools, grocery stores and coffee shops. The students' mission, as cultural journalists, is to discover how New Haven residents feel about their city now, the way it used to be, the changes that have taken place, and the changes that could take place. Their best writing will be collected at the end, typed by the students in our computer lab and put into book form. I will use William Zinsser's book "On Writing Well," specifically the chapter entitled "The Interview" to teach good interviewing skills. Some of my specific objectives in this unit are to help my

students:1.) Improve writing skills through a variety of writing assignments2.) Develop interviewing skills and techniques3.) Develop confidence through inquiry and interviewing4.) Find traditions and patterns in their society and communities5.) Learn the value of writing about what they know6.) Discover their own ability to investigate and interpret other people's experiences.7.) Find their own place in the city through analyzing, seeing, and writing. Because there will be so much writing in this class, I will need to set a tone of safety and cooperation within the classroom. As a writer and a teacher I truly understand the vulnerability connected with writing and then sharing one's written work. I tell my students in all my writing classes that negativity and criticism are not allowed, at all! I learned this lesson from watching Lloyd Richards, the former Dean of Yale Drama School, conduct his workshops this way. The amount of creativity and the powerful plays playwrights produced under his tutelage is proof that this method works. If however, a written piece can be improved, we state that in a sensitive, helpful way. It has been my experience that after students feel safe, they will produce happily and, most importantly, proudly. I have used the following listening exercise in many different classes, always with a lot of success. It is fun, it teaches interviewing techniques and it breaks the ice amongst students who are meeting each other for the first time. Here it is.

Directions For this exercise, you will need a partner. (I divide the class into partners, randomly). Flip a coin to see who will ask the questions first. These questions are designed so that everyone has an answer. I also think of them as safe questions that illicit memories and response rather than fear and anxiety. Please feel free, however, to make up your own questions to suit your students needs. Proceed in this manner.

Step 1 Partner #1 asks the following six questions.

- 1.) Describe how you got to school in the first grade
- 2.) What accomplishment do you remember taking pride in during those early years in school?
- 3.) Describe the first time you remember being embarrassed in school.
- 4.) Who is the first teacher you ever liked and what did you like about him/her?
- 5.) What did you dislike about elementary school?
- 6.) What is your memory of recess?

Partner #1 listens intently as partner #2 answers. There is no note-taking allowed. Only listening. Then #2 asks number 1 the same questions. When they are both finished responding, each one sits down and writes a summary of what they learned from the interview. They are not to write it as a series of answers to questions, but rather in paragraph form telling the story they learned (in the third person). If they were good listeners they should have at least a page to write. When the whole class is finished, I ask each student to share their writing with the whole class. In this way we all get to know each other and hopefully build some trust among the group. Since my writing classes involve a lot of sharing and reading out loud this is good practice. Neighborhoods My unit will start with an exploration of neighborhoods. Students will be asked to research their neighborhood's history and development. (Westville, Newhallville, Fairhaven, The Hill, etc.) This

assignment will be a written one, but presented orally so that the class will come together as a group, with knowledge of where we are from and how we are connected. Information on specific neighborhoods can be found at The Connecticut Historical Society. As part of this process students will be asked to work in groups drawing maps of their neighborhoods that include prominent features such as heavily travelled streets and parks. There is already developed a very good curriculum unit by a teacher on Fairhaven (my neighborhood) which we will also use. My hope is that the theme of neighborhoods will be a pleasant jumping off point to discuss our relationship to the city before we head into less pleasant things like drugs and poverty. Classroom discussions could center on the concept or definition of a neighborhood and exactly what constitutes a neighborhood including its history and geographical factors. I recommend two articles for this section. Both are from Jane Jacobs' book "The Death and Life of Great American Cities." Jacobs was a city planner who dared to challenge traditional theories in her field. Instead of simply accepting what she read, she went out into communities, talked to people and saw what really did and didn't work through observation. Her writing is insightful, perceptive and, I think, very important reading for those who truly want change. She is also an excellent writer, and therefore a good role model for students. I plan to use the introduction to her book and the chapter entitled "A Good Neighborhood." She examines what kinds of city streets are safe and what kinds aren't, and why some city parks are "marvelous" and others aren't. She also looks at why some slums stay slums and others regenerate themselves. An excellent assignment based on this reading would be to have students write a description of their street or neighborhood or the area they hang out in. Poverty Our main reading for the subject of poverty will be Alex Kotlowitz's book "There are No Children Here." This work of nonfiction explores growing up in Chicago's projects. We see life through the eyes of Lafayette and Pharoah, two brothers who try to find joy amidst gunfire and gangs. It is a sad, horrifying book, but an important one nonetheless. I like it because it personalizes the projects and project life. It humanizes the people, shows their desperation and desire to succeed under incredibly adverse circumstances. Discussion questions will include:

- 1.) Describe Lafayette and Pharoah's personalities
- 2.) Why are they afraid to play basketball?
- 3.) What role does the gang leader Jimmy Lee play in his community?
- 4.) Why did Chicago's Mayor Jane Byrne sleep at the projects for one week?
- 5.) What does the title "There are No Children Here" refer to?
- 6.) What means of escape do Lafayette and Pharoah have?
- 7.) What type of mother do they have?

Another suggested reading for this topic is the poem "The Poor", by William Carlos Williams, also in "The Little, Brown Reader." My planned activity is a field trip to the welfare office, and the writing assignment is to interview someone on welfare. In addition an interview with a local alderman or congressperson will be required. Crime The first reading in the section on crime will be William Finnegan's two part piece from "The New Yorker" entitled "Out There." This is an excellent choice for many reasons. One is that it has a lot of local

appeal. My students will be able to identify places geographically, which is always interesting. The main reason this is an excellent choice, however, is that it is so well written. It is an example of cultural journalism at its best, as the writer is emotionally involved in his subject and in the article. The article explores the choices (or lack of) that one black family in New Haven makes, including dealing drugs. Since this is a choice a lot of my students have made, it needs to be addressed in the classroom. Through the eyes of Terry, a pseudonym, we see the real drug world. We see the money, the clothes, the appeal to the girls, and the life and death risks he takes. One warning, however, about this particular piece is that it is powerful. It hits close to home on an explosive subject. Many of New Haven's students have had friends and relatives who have been killed from dealing drugs. Many live in the neighborhoods described in the article as "slave quarters" (Quinnipiac: Terrace for example) and it will open wounds that need to be treated gently and responsibly. Some of the questions I intend to explore with this piece are:

- 1.) What alternatives to selling drugs does the article show? (Yale, religion, professional sports, Rap Star, McDonalds) What do you think of these choices? Which one would you make? What other ones do you think are available to black kids from New Haven?
- 2.) What role does T.V. play in the family's lives? What role does T.V. play in your life?
- 3.) What role and or responsibility do girls play in the drug scene?
- 4.) What do you think about Virginia Henry who started the organization "Tenants Against Drugs, Dammit"?
- 5.) What reason does Terry give for not dealing drugs anymore?
- 6.) What is community based policing? Is it located in your neighborhood? What do your neighbors think about it? What do you think about it?
- 7.) What kind of mother do you think Anjelica is? What are her good points? bad points? What does the author of the article think Anjelica wants out of life?
- 8.) What does the title "Out There" mean? Have you ever felt out there? What advice do you have for people out there?
- 9.) Why are most drug dealers young black men?
- 10.) Write an editorial on possible solutions to the drug problem in New Haven

Terry makes the decision not to sell drugs after he turns fifteen because he could then be tried as an adult. And as an adult he would go to jail if caught. Is the threat of jail a deterrent? Should all juveniles be tried as adults? What other deterrents to selling drugs are there? Two good field trips for this section are a visit to the jail on Whalley Avenue and The Superior Court on Church St. You must call in advance. One writing assignment will be either an interview with a drug dealer or a student's opinion on drug dealers. For those

students who choose to interview a drug dealer you must remind them to be careful not to use any names and not to put themselves into a dangerous situation. Sometimes students' enthusiasm overcomes their common sense. Another assignment will be an interview with local residents about their feelings on crime and personal safety. A more formal expository essay will be due entitled "Is capital punishment a solution to crime?" In The Little, Brown anthology there are two excellent readings to prepare for this assignment. They are "In Favor of Capital Punishment," by Jacques Barzun, and "In Opposition to Death Penalty Legislation," by Henry Schwarzschild. One guest speaker I intend to ask to come for a visit is Chris Alexy, a prosecutor in New Haven's Superior Court. Another excellent speaker and an avid supporter of New Haven's public schools is Tom Morrissey, a New Haven police officer. He is comfortable in the classroom and his ideas are thought provoking. As well as discussing crime it would be helpful to hear his ideas on community based policing.

Ways of Seeing your City I would like to spend some time in this course helping students to really see their city, perhaps from a new perspective. There is a lot to be said about the relationship between looking and writing, about getting students to "look" and to begin to analyze and describe what they see. Armed with sketch pads and pencils I intend to spend a few hours sitting on the New Haven Green with my students looking around, and then drawing what we see from any angle we choose. A few tips about drawing can come in handy here. Keep it light and keep the pressure off. After we finish drawing, the homework assignment that night will be to describe in words what they saw. This, I think, is a nice introduction to the descriptive essay. This segment of the class would make a wonderful introduction to photojournalism as well. Cameras are available at most schools. Each student will take approximately ten pictures of any aspect of city life that interests them. It is important to limit the number of shots so that they are forced to really think about them. Exposing students to great photojournalists would be a wonderful way to divide up all the reading and writing that this class entails, and also show the students that powerful communication of ideas can be done with the camera. Many excellent photographs are contained in a book entitled "Reading American Photographs Images as History—Matthew Brady to Walker Evans." Some of the pictures I am going to use from this book are "The Hand of Man" by Alfred Steiglitz, "Engineer" and "The Spirit of Industry" by Lewis Hine, "A bench in the Bronx on Sunday" by Walker Evans and scenes from ghetto life by Jacob Riis. These pictures show a variety of images of city life both positive and negative. A slide show of their work would make a visually profound activity. Black and white slides can be made very easily by photographing the pictures you want to use from photography books. Later, when all the students have done their photographs I will have a slide show of their work. A walking tour of New Haven with a guide from The New Haven Preservation Trust is highly recommended. Some ideas for assignments include drawing your favorite building in New Haven and interviewing a local artist, perhaps at The Creative Arts Workshop.

People and their jobs Another important aspect of exploring city life, in some ways the most important, is the relationship between people and what they do for work. Included in this exploration is how people relate to their job and how society treats us in direct relation to what we do. As a way to broaden my student's knowledge of work and career choices, and to help them a.) find work they love to do and b.) learn respect for all types of jobs, we will read a few selections from Studs Terkel's incredible book "Working," a collection of interviews with people in all types of jobs. Because I have ordered "The Little, Brown Reader" specifically for this class I will use the selections from that book—the airline stewardess, the hooker and a domestic. But, I will add to these xeroxes of the policeman and a factory worker. Needless to say the police are a controversial subject now so this part needs to allow a lot of room for expression of anger. My hope is that by understanding the job the police have and the many, many difficulties they face, some new understanding many develop This is very important to me because the majority of my students are minority and it is the minority population that most need police protection. Any lines of communication teachers can open would be invaluable. An assignment based on the reading of Terkel's interview with a policeman is, after reading the section, to skim back to find his attitudes on the following subjects: growing up in a slum, prostitution, a policeman's best sources of information, making

detective, college radicals, the role of the media in demonstrations, radio calls, the law, the role of a cop, long haired guys, directing traffic and how to raise children. For each subject, write what his opinion is based on evidence from the reading and why you think he arrived at that opinion. A more formal essay will be due on "What are your experiences with the New Haven Police? What interactions have you observed between the police and the community?" The main assignment for this section of the class will force students to combine their interviewing techniques with their newly developed writing skills in order to explore a possible career choice. Students will be required to choose a career, find someone (with my help) in the New Haven area who does that job, set up an interview, and then, armed with at least twenty good questions, conduct an interview. The next day a rough draft showing some organization of their notes is due and then a few days later, the final copy. This final copy will be their version of "Working," New Haven style. Cultural Diversity in City Life This section of the class, entitled cultural diversity, is really a form of multi-cultural studies. My goal with this section is to enhance our awareness and knowledge of the various cultures that make up New Haven. I plan to do this by inviting guest speakers into the classroom. Some of the people I plan to ask as guest speakers include Dennis Hart from The Latino Youth Development and a representative from The Dixwell Community House. The Ethnic Heritage Foundation is a relatively new organization in New Haven dedicated to saving and appreciating different cultural backgrounds. They are anxious to come into schools and help expand cultural awareness. The writing assignment for this section is "what can local organizations do to help their communities?" By the end of the course I hope that we will all see the city in a new way, and have a deeper understanding of the various components that make up city life. It is also my hope that this new and deeper awareness will empower my students and help offer some positive solutions for improving their lives. Other terrific assignments that I will use in this class but that don't fit neatly into one of my categories are:

- 1.) Read "The Mall" by Bob Greene. Greene's article is a humorous, and insightful view of malls as he follows two white teenage boys for a full day in a suburban shopping mall. He records their dialogue which includes their views on sneakers, girls and the world. It is wonderful. A writing assignment based on this reading that high school students everywhere would love is—"Take a trip to your local mall. What people and things do you see?"
- 2.) Take a field trip to a senior citizen center and interview the senior citizens about their lives and the changes they've seen in New Haven.
- 3.) Visit East Rock Nature Center and interview a local park ranger.
- 4.) Describe your idea of a perfect city. Some suggested movies what would be good in this course include: "Roger and Me," "All the President's Men," "Between the Lines," "Perfect," "Absence of Malice," "Hester Street," "Grand Canyon," "Boyz n the Hood."

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