



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute  
1995 Volume IV: Coming of Age in Ethnic America

---

## Introduction

### Introduction

There is no greater challenge facing public school educators than the development of a new curriculum adequate to the needs of today's students. Diversity is the key. We have never been the homogeneous nation that our myths and ideologies have suggested. The United States has always been comprised of a wealth of different racial and ethnic traditions. Sometimes we think of ourselves as a "melting pot," a metaphor that suggests the commonalities we all share through the process of "Americanization." But what gets lost in the melting pot metaphor are the differences that are as important to our lives as the shared traditions.

The curriculum units in this volume are designed to address the question of difference as well as the question of similarity. They spring from a seminar that looked at the literature and art of three ethnic and racial traditions in the United States: African-American, Latino and Native American. The seminar focused on twentieth-century materials arranged topically: the immigrant experience, folkways, the city, the woman's corner, and healing. Each topic juxtaposed writers or artists from two traditions. "The City," for instance, involved a comparative reading of Chicano writer Ron Arias (*The Road to Tamazunchale*) with African-American author Ann Petry (*The Street*). The magical realism of Arias' novel, with its absurdist humor and utopian hopes, contrasted interestingly with Petry's gritty—and demoralizing—urban naturalism.

The goals of each of these units is to put students in touch with their histories and heritages. The units also strive to familiarize students with the backgrounds and traditions of other students. Some of the units take a topical approach; they single out a particular theme, method or motif that provides a focus for the materials of the unit. Elsa Calderón tackles the world of Caribbean culture through food. Patrice Flynn looks at children's books written for African-American kids. Kevin Miller deals with male image building among African-American students through a creative use of the writing process. And Sylvia Sherertz looks at African and African-American traditions of quilt making.

Other units focus comparatively on different racial and ethnic communities. Val-Jean Belton puts together art projects for her students that look at the crafts traditions of African, Mexican and Caribbean peoples. Gerene Freeman shapes a creative writing curriculum that draws together writings from African-American, Latino and Native American authors. Ida Hickerson examines the geographies, histories and cultures of these same groups, and Jean Sutherland develops reading exercises that introduce students to books by Latino and Native American writers.

Virtually all these curriculum units involve an interdisciplinary use of materials. The units that focus on literature also investigate art. The units that are primarily visual or artistic also include culture and history.

They all share a common concern to integrate visual and written materials, and to interpret both from an historical point of view. They are all designed to develop students' self-esteem and to help students live respectfully with each other.

## **Section I**

### **Topical Units**

1. Elsa Calderón's "El Sabor del Caribe/A Taste of the Carribbean" takes its flavor from the different foods of Puerto Rico and the Caribbean. The unit is designed for Spanish language teachers as well as those non-language teachers who want to integrate more Puerto Rican materials into their literature or social studies courses. Calderón's unit begins by introducing the students to the geography and history of the region, and then zooms in on Puerto Rico, where it focuses on the food and eating traditions of the island. Calderón utilizes a wide variety of materials for her unit: short stories, novels, poetry, art and folk sayings or "refranes," all concerned with the rich lore that surrounds eating in Puerto Rico. This is a hands-on unit with a great deal of information and many novel tastes for students to experience.

2. Patrice Flynn's "Literature and Art Through Our Eyes" deals with the reading skills and emotional needs of second and third grade African American students. Flynn's unit turns to stories about African American children in order to encourage discussion among the students and to help them examine issues appropriate to their developmental level. Flynn has chosen a variety of books that are rich in text and illustration. Her unit moves through a series of successive sub-themes: "My Self", "My Family," "My Neighborhood" and "My Friends." Like a series of concentric circles, each sub-theme grows out of the next, allowing the student to expand her or his horizons from personal matters to increasingly social ones.

3. Kevin Miller takes a different approach for his unit. "Male Image Building Utilizing the Writing Process" is designed to help African- American male children in the fourth grade develop self-esteem through collaborative writing efforts. The unit turns the classroom into a writing workshop, developing different stages of the writing process, from the gathering of materials to the final production of book-like products. The unit deals with issues central to males, but the collective approach to writing that it entails can be applied to a variety of different situations.

4. Sylvia Sherertz uses the resources of an art instructor to teach "The Art of the Quilt." Sherertz engages her students in a hands-on set of exercises designed to produce an actual quilt by the end of the unit. Treating quilts as works of art, and art as a form of expression available to all people, Sherertz divides her unit into five sections: a history of quilt making, a look at African techniques and traditions, an examination of the story quilts of nineteenth-century African-American Harriet Powers, an historical overview of quilt making within the African-American community, and a concluding exercise in putting together your own quilt. The result is twofold: an historical understanding of how quilts have developed and been used in Africa and the United States, and practical experience in the designing and making of quilts.

## Section II

### Comparative Units

5. Val-Jean Belton's "Ethnic Art: African, Mexican and Caribbean Perspectives" brings the artistic traditions of different peoples to middle school art students. Belton teaches her students not only how to reproduce the art from the different artistic traditions she examines, but the history and lore that goes into that art. She converts arts and crafts from Ghana, from the Otomi tribe in San Pablito, Mexico, and from Puerto Rico, into a lesson in cultural history. At the same time, she introduces her students to important art historical concepts: the differences between negative and positive space, the use of symbols, etc.

6. Gerene Freeman turns to creative writing in "Pathways to the Imagination" to inspire her students to articulate their feelings and experiences. Freeman also introduces her students to a wide variety of artists, both literary and visual, from a broad range of traditions. The unit moves through three ever-widening spheres: Me, Worlds Converging, and what she terms, "Building 'Buff' Imaginations." Each sub-unit looks at the works of established writers and then asks the students to produce their own version of the type of creative writing they have just examined. The exercises build writerly discipline among the students at the same time as they free students to experiment with their own imaginations.

7. Ida Hickerson's "Mosaic America: Paths to the Present" is one in a series of units she has written (and will continue in the future to write). Hickerson introduces her middle school students to the histories and cultures of African-Americans, Latinos and Native Americans. She engages her students with these materials on a personal level by requiring them to keep written journals, develop time lines, make oral presentations, and attend field trips to local museums and points of cultural interest. The unit emphasizes the distinctive history of each of the groups it studies; it also shows how these separate histories reverberate with each other as part of what we think of—or don't think of—when we refer to "American" history.

8. Jean Sutherland's unit, "Expanding Fifth Grade Ethnic Awareness (Latino and Native American) Through Literature," builds on a previous unit that similarly concerned itself with African American narrative. Sutherland takes a comparative look at two novels written for students roughly at fifth grade learning and developmental levels: *Juanita Fights the School Board* and *A Brown Bird Singing*. By carefully analyzing the problems faced by the main characters in each novel, Sutherland engages her students in ethical and practical questions about issues that affect their own lives. She also introduces them to the culture and customs of the ethnic groups at the center of each novel. Lesson plans for this unit emphasize skills of critical thinking and literary analysis.

All of the above units should prove valuable resources for teachers interested in expanding the ethnic and racial understanding of their students. All provide practical information as well as carefully considered lesson plans. And all are concerned to link knowledge about others to questions of self-knowledge.

Bryan J. Wolf

Professor of American Studies and English

---

<https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu>

©2019 by the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, Yale University

For terms of use visit <https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu/terms>