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Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative

2005 Volume II: Art and Identity in Mexico, from Olmec Times to the Present

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## **Studying the Biographies of Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera**

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### **Introduction**

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As a reading teacher in a fine arts magnet middle school naturally I include the fine arts in my curriculum. Many of my students transfer to my school for their fine art skills. These skills include: orchestra, band, choir, dance, gymnastics, drama and of course art. As any teacher knows, the best way to get a child interested in learning is by making it relevant to his or her life. The goal of this unit is to do just that.

Biographies are one genre that we teach in reading. I find that many of my students have never read a biography when they come to me in the sixth grade. For that matter they haven't read much non-fiction either. Their interest lies in fiction, especially fantasy. I too love these books but non-fiction is also very important. After all, the textbooks for all the other subjects are written in non-fiction. So it is here that I begin my unit.

The purpose of this unit is to introduce students to the genre of non-fiction, specifically focusing on biographies. This unit will introduce biographies by reading brief biographies of Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera. We will read two short biographies of Kahlo and compare how the stories vary from author to author. Comparing texts is an important skill learned in middle school. It helps students analyze text and think about it in new and different ways. The students will then read a short biography of Rivera in small groups. They will then create a timeline of his life and write a chronological paragraph summarizing what they read. By the end of the unit they will be very familiar with the lives of Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera. They will have read, analyzed and compared biographies by different authors. They will also be given brief biographies of various people to read and paraphrase. Finally students will create an autobiography booklet of themselves.

This unit is specifically written for sixth grade. However modifications for lower and higher grades and abilities can be used. Please feel free to use the entire unit or just parts for the needs of your classroom.

## Overview

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This unit studies biographies as a genre of text. The students will be reading biographies and comparing different authors, developing timelines chronicling life events, creating presentations on research using biographies, and writing autobiographies.

Biographies can bring history and people to life. It is a very important aspect when teaching non-fiction. Students can relate to biographies because although the information is non-fiction and factual, it is told in the form of a story. Students can relate to the trials and tribulations that many of the people they read about go through. Using biographies to introduce non-fiction is a great transition from fiction to non-fiction. The writing aspect and research of this unit is essential to any language arts curriculum. It will help students gather information and synthesize it. The presentation aspect of this unit helps students to become comfortable with public speaking. Students need to learn how to coherently present a topic without sounding nervous or unprepared.

My work to develop this curriculum unit took place in a seminar called Art and Identity in Mexico, From Olmec Times to the Present led by Mary E. Miller, Professor of History of Art at Yale University. This seminar was a study of Mexico and the ancient art and artifacts that are known to have come from there, as well as more modern art. The seminar offered an intense study of discoveries found in Mexico that have changed the art, art history, and historical world. The seminar taught how important the Aztec, Mayan and Olmec culture was to present Mexico and the current world of art and architectural history. As mentioned earlier this unit is a written lesson that deals with the teaching of biographies. For this unit of study we will begin by introducing the biographies of two very famous Mexican artists: Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera. These artists were very influential in the shaping of Mexican politics and identity. Their impact reaches far and wide and doesn't restrict itself to the borders of Mexico. However, throughout their public art lives they maintained their dedication to their home country and made known their pride in their Mexican heritage. Though this study begins with the lives of Mexican artists, it expands to the study of various biographies not limited to Mexican or artists.

The objective of this unit is to provide a transition from the reading of fiction to the reading of non-fiction through the use of biography. Though biography is categorized as non-fiction, students respond to it more positively because it is written in story format, which they are familiar with because of their fiction reading background. With this unit students will be exposed to the genre of biography with the introduction of the biographies of Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera. In summary the unit will cover the following skills: non-fiction reading, descriptive writing, oral presentation, and creative autobiographical writing.

### **Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera**

Why should we study the biographies of these two artists? The simplest answer is because they are the most famous married artists of our time. The story of their lives has changed everything we once knew about Mexican artists. They paved the way for many other Mexican artists behind them. They certainly did not have the perfect marriage and in fact it was riddled with controversy and chaos. However, we find that the more we read about them as a couple, and each as an individual, the more we want to know. Using their lives as an introduction to studying biography gives us a broad palette with which to work. There are numerous books written about the two of them as a couple and as individuals. The sources from which to work are abundant and so the story becomes immense. They did more than just paint and that is where we can really study them

biographically. From the time Diego Rivera started as a muralist he drew media frenzy. Everyone knew who he was. At one time his wife was just a woman who happened also to be a painter. Eventually that changed. Now we find that she has eclipsed his fame with hers. She represents many things to many people. She is a strong Mexican woman, a feminist, a survivor and a political activist. He is also a strong Mexican man, a political activist and an incredibly talented painter. It is all of these things that make each of them very interesting. This is why we want to read about their lives.

## **The Story of Frida Kahlo**

Frida Kahlo was born July 6, 1907, in Coyoacán, Mexico. At the tender age of six Kahlo was stricken with a bout of polio. For months she suffered terrible pains in her right leg. This leg was never to heal fully and would always be thin and frail. Her father was an example to her that she could accomplish anything she wanted, regardless of her disability. Her father, Guillermo, was diagnosed with epilepsy after a head trauma as a child. Despite the fact that he would sometimes have seizures, he was able to have a successful business as a photographer. Though she had a close relationship with her father, who taught her about photography and paint, her relationship with her mother, Matilde, was strained. This was mainly due to her mother's strict adherence to Catholic ways, which Frida resisted.

In 1922 Kahlo applied and was accepted into the newly co-ed National Preparatory School. It was here that she first met Diego Rivera who was hired to paint the walls of the auditorium. As was her nature, Kahlo did all she could to torment Rivera with practical jokes and pranks. It was here also that Kahlo met and fell in love with Alejandro Gómez Arias. The two were members of a group called The Cachuchas, who were well known for their disregard for rules and their constant pranks and tricks. Tragedy struck on September 17, 1925 in the form of a terrible bus accident. The bus that Kahlo and Arias were riding was violently struck by a trolley and thrust into the wall of a building. Many passengers were injured and Kahlo sustained terrible wounds from a metal rod that had pierced through her torso. She was taken to the emergency room where the full extent of her injuries was realized. Kahlo had suffered shattered bones in her right leg, a fractured spine and pelvis, two broken ribs, a dislocated shoulder as well as her abdominal injury. She awakened in a plaster body cast. Although some of her Cachuchas friends visited her, Arias was not one of them. After three months in the hospital, Kahlo was finally moved back to her home for further recovery where she continued to write him in hopes that he would visit her. It was not meant to be, and although their friendship remained, they would never again be lovers. During this time Kahlo took up the art of painting and began to focus more intently on her skill. For the duration of her time being bedridden Kahlo began to paint self-portraits using a mirror. Her portraits, she said, portrayed herself more of how she felt than how she actually looked.

In 1927 Kahlo decided it was time to make a choice about her artwork. She took her paintings to Rivera and asked if he thought they were good enough for her to continue with painting. He said that they were. The friendship between the two began here. Rivera would frequently visit the Kahlo home. In 1929 Kahlo and Rivera were married. After her marriage to Diego Rivera, Kahlo soon realized that Rivera put his artwork first. She spent much of her time devoted to catering to Rivera's needs. She changed her style of clothes to the colorful Mexican Indian dresses that she knew he liked. This was quite opposite from the rebellious spirit with which Rivera fell in love. He did not like to be clung to. He liked the independent Frida that he first met.

Early in her marriage Kahlo became pregnant. Doctors were concerned about her carrying the baby to term because they did not think her frail body could handle it. Rivera also did not want to have any more children. He had four children by three different women. Under pressure, Kahlo went through with an abortion. She wept for weeks. Soon afterwards Kahlo began to hear the rumors of her husband's infidelity. This caused one

more layer of pain for Kahlo. It is from this mountain of pain that Kahlo drew her inspiration for many of her paintings.

In 1930 Rivera and Kahlo left for the United States. Work was scarce in Mexico for Rivera and many wealthy American businessmen were offering him money to paint murals in the U.S. Kahlo was overjoyed at the prospect of the visit. She had wanted to see the United States when she was younger but was never able to. Now she would be traveling with her husband in style. Kahlo soon realized that her idealistic dream of America was quite different from reality.

The couple had arrived in America in the deep days of the Great Depression. Around her Kahlo saw unemployed men and women lining the streets to wait for bread and offerings from soup kitchens. She would see run down houses and people living in the streets all the while she and Rivera were whisked around town by wealthy prospective employers. Throughout her time in San Francisco, New York and Detroit, Kahlo could not embrace what she considered the lack of compassion among American people. She longed to return home to her country of Mexico.

Kahlo loved all types of animals. As an adult, living with Rivera, Kahlo filled her house with exotic animals to help take her mind off her pain that was continuing to grow. The accident had left such damage to Kahlo's body that she was in constant pain which only grew worse with age. Kahlo had a monkey, chipmunk, turkey, parrot and even an eagle living in her house as pets.

Though her pain was intense, her spirit was strong. In 1943 she began teaching art at a nearby art school. At one point Kahlo's body was in so much pain she told the students to come paint at her house. She never gave up on anything she did. In 1953 Kahlo's friends organized an art exhibition in Mexico City. Following the doctor's order to remain bedridden, Kahlo showed up at her exhibition by way of ambulance. She was placed on a beautiful four-poster bed where she greeted all her fans who attended the exhibition.

Kahlo will always be remembered for her great spirit and her ability to show her pain through her paintings. Kahlo did not hold back when it came to her personal sorrows and joys. She was a masterful painter who defied the trends of painting happy scenes of everyday life. Even though she was not well known until her later years and then not even as famous as she is now, Kahlo was able to break down barriers for Mexican women and for women in general.

Near the end of her life Kahlo's leg was amputated. At first she was down but eventually, in true Kahlo fashion, she accepted her artificial leg and even began to paint again. Her final painting was a still life of watermelon.

### **The Story of Diego Rivera**

It is sometimes said that Diego Rivera made his art into his life. Some believe that many of the stories Rivera told about himself never actually happened. It was simply a way for Rivera to make himself seem larger than life, much like the murals he created. Stories about his actual birth date and his given name differ among historians. The story of his life is riddled with untruths and exaggerations. So even for this brief biography that follows, I cannot guarantee that all the information is factual. Rivera was known to embellish his life and therefore some of the following information presented may be incorrect. It is part of the chance one takes when writing about a person such as Diego Rivera. Truth and untruth will surface, but all things considered the story is interesting.

December 8, 1886; Diego Rivera and his twin brother Carlos were born in the city of Guanajuato, Mexico.

Tragically less than two years later Carlos fell sick and died. From ages two to three Rivera lived with his nurse, Antonia, in a remote mountain village. Upon returning, Rivera began to express his love of drawing. He began to draw on anything he could find, including walls. His father decided to cover an entire room with canvas in order to dissuade Rivera from painting on any other part of the house. At ten years of age Rivera's family moved to Mexico City. His father began editing a journal titled *The Democrat* in which he expressed his contempt for the government for their part in the misery of existence of the miners and peasants of the town. This of course was not received well by officials and he and his family began to feel the pressure by the government. Shortly after moving to Mexico City Rivera became ill with scarlet fever and typhoid. Also around this time his mother became pregnant but lost her baby a week after being born.

At the age of ten Rivera decided to become an artist and therefore his parents enrolled him in the San Carlos Art Academy in Mexico City, Mexico. Rivera was influenced by José Posada, a print shop owner, who made a living carving blocks of wood depicting the street scenes of Mexico. Posada was for a time Rivera's mentor. Posada cautioned Rivera on accepting the European influence of art that was being taught in his school. He believed Rivera should embrace the art of the native people of his country.

1903 brought a change in Rivera's life due to his expulsion from school. He had rebelled against the new school director and participated in a student revolt. His expulsion from school led Rivera to become a wanderer through the state of Veracruz where he studied the ruins of the Aztec and their predecessors, heeding the advice of his mentor, Posada. In 1907 Rivera traveled to Europe to study art. Rivera was inspired by such painters as Paul Cézanne, El Greco, Francisco Goya, and Diego Velázquez. There he became friends with Pablo Picasso. Under the European influences of the time, some of Rivera's paintings began to take the form of Cubism, such as *Woman at the Well*. Rivera began to realize that only the rich had access to his artwork. He was influenced by frescos in Italy and decided to return to Mexico to make murals for all people to enjoy, and fortunately enough for him, he received a government commission to do so! In 1910 Rivera returned briefly to Mexico. There he found that the textile workers had gone on strike to protest their meager wages. President Porfirio Diaz sent in troops to stop the rebellion. The soldiers brutally shot men, women and children. The Mexican Revolution would continue for many years, but Rivera never forgot the horror he saw that day. Upon returning to Europe Rivera met Angelina Beloff, after two years of dating, Rivera and Beloff were married. This was the first of Rivera's four marriages.

In the years following World War I Rivera became fascinated by Renaissance art. He was especially fond of the frescoes. The idea that everyone would be able to enjoy his work, not just the wealthy, was an idea Rivera embraced. He was very much taken with the communist movement and joined the Communist Party in 1923. Many of his actions and paintings reflect his belief in this system. Rivera's second marriage to Lupe Marín produced two daughters. Lupe shared Rivera's communist beliefs.

One of Rivera's first murals was *Creation* done in 1922-1923 at the National Preparatory School in Mexico City, Mexico, where he met Frida Kahlo. Many of the murals Rivera painted were controversial to some people. A prime example is the *Man, Controller of the Universe* (also called *Man at the Crossroads*) mural at Rockefeller Center in New York City, New York, commissioned by John D. Rockefeller, one of the richest capitalists in the world. When Rockefeller found out that Rivera had included the face of Vladimir Lenin, the Russian Revolutionary leader, he ordered him to cover it. Rivera refused and Rockefeller ordered the wall to be demolished.

In 1932 Rivera arrived in Detroit, Michigan to begin his mural in the Detroit Institute of Art. Rivera spent quite some time studying the people of the city before he began painting. In the following quote we can really see

how much research Rivera put into his murals. He spent a great deal of time studying his subject before he even began to paint. The intensity for his work is admirable.

I spent the two and one-half months between my meeting with the Art Commission and the beginning of my actual mural work in soaking up impressions of the productive activities of the city. I studied industrial scenes by night as well as by day, making literally thousands of sketches of towering blast furnaces, serpentine conveyor belts, impressive scientific laboratories, busy assembling rooms; also of precision instruments, some of them massive yet delicate; and of the men who worked them all. I walked for miles through the immense workshops of the Ford, Chrysler, Edison, Michigan Alkali, and Parke-Davis plants. I was afire with enthusiasm. (Rivera, 111)

For the rest of his life Rivera painted murals and continued to uplift the Mexican people by painting them as strong, free people who were fairly treated. He went against the idea of the rich controlling the poor. In addition to being famous for his murals Rivera will also be known for his famous marriage to Frida Kahlo. He has said she was the true love of his life. Although many of the stories he told of himself were embellished, he did live a remarkable life. Even if many of his stories were fabricated, no one can accuse Rivera of being a boring storyteller. Rivera died in 1957.

### **The Story of "Frog Face and the Walking Flower" (Krull, 84)**

One day Kahlo was walking toward the Ministry of Education building and saw Rivera painting one of his murals. In classic Kahlo fashion, she shouted up to him to come down. Rivera made his way down, curious to know who this daring young girl could be. Kahlo was carrying some of her paintings and wanted Rivera's opinion of them. She had decided that it was time to make a choice and if she wasn't good enough to be a professional artist she was to pursue another career to help her parents financially. Rivera informed her that indeed her work was good. This was the beginning of their relationship. They began to spend much of their time together with Rivera visiting the Kahlo home often. Rivera began to paint Kahlo into many of his murals. Kahlo, in turn, began to paint more often. Kahlo and Rivera announced their marriage plans with the overwhelming support of Guillermo. After all, Rivera was a very wealthy man known for his generosity and Kahlo's chances of attending medical school, her former life plan, were shattered with the accident. Matilde on the other hand did not approve so heartily. She did not approve of Rivera's communistic and atheist beliefs. The wedding proceeded on August 21, 1929 with Guillermo as the only family member in attendance.

One of many similarities between Kahlo and Rivera was their childhood struggle with disease. Kahlo suffered from polio at a very early age. Rivera suffered from scarlet fever, typhoid and diphtheria. These two famous artists once knew what it was like to be in ill health and bedridden. This is perhaps the reason they lived life to the fullest when they were able. Another similarity came from the background of each parent. Both their fathers were free thinkers of mixed Spanish and Portuguese-Jewish descent. Their mothers were of mixed Spanish and Indian descent and devout Catholics.

The most obvious difference between Kahlo and Rivera were their looks. Kahlo enjoyed dressing very feminine and often wore the dresses of the Mexican Indian women. Her hair was most always braided and her makeup was always on. She created herself into a work of art. Rivera, on the other hand, had a style that was far from Kahlo's. He wore overalls sometimes and other times he simply wore comfortable pants, long sleeved shirts, and boots. His one distinct feature was his broad hat he frequently wore. When the two were together they could not have looked more opposite. Rivera was a six foot tall, three hundred pound, average looking man.

Kahlo was a petite five foot three, ninety-eight pound, decorated, unique looking woman. It is said that when people would see them together they would stop to look at this unusual sight. In addition to their differing dress style, there was also the age gap between the two. Twenty years separated Rivera from Kahlo.

It is well documented that the couple had their share of turmoil. Most famously, Rivera is known to be unfaithful in his marriage (even to the point of taking up with Kahlo's sister). Less known are Kahlo's love affairs. Kahlo and Rivera even lived in separate houses linked together by a walkway. The turmoil eventually led to divorce in 1940. The couple realized that they could not live without one another and so they remarried in December of that same year. They remained married until Kahlo's death in 1954.

## Teaching Frida Kahlo

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In learning about Frida Kahlo we will use several sources. By doing this we will have the opportunity to compare texts. Even though an author writes a biography it doesn't always mean that the entire story is told. Although the information provided may be factual, there may also be some information eliminated. It is important for students to understand this differentiation among texts.

### Frida by Jonah Winter

We will start with the book *Frida* by Jonah Winter. This simple picture book tells the life of Kahlo as a young girl and briefly goes into her adulthood as a painter. The illustrations in this book are quite wonderful. As mentioned above, not all biographers include the entire life story of an individual. This is the case for this book. The author focuses more on her childhood and her love of painting. No mention is made about the role of the Mexican Revolution or her marriage to Diego Rivera. It is simply about her. One reason I chose this book is because it focuses on Kahlo's love of art and not so much on her adversity. It does mention the bus accident she suffered as a young woman but that does not overshadow her story. Although there is much more to Kahlo than this book provides, it is a great introduction to her life. As mentioned earlier the illustrations are beautiful and can be studied as part of the art critique to come later in the unit. However the illustrations are not Kahlo's original work, they are the work of the illustrator Ana Juan.

Before reading the book, I will start the lesson with a KWLS chart. KWLS stands for What I Know, What I Want to Know, What I Learned, What I Still Want to Learn. This chart is simply a piece of paper with four columns. The first column the students will write what they already know about Frida Kahlo. It might be as simple as she was an artist. Some students may know nothing at all and that is fine too. The second column will be filled with information the students want to know about Frida Kahlo. What questions they have about this person and anything they are hoping to gain from learning about her should be written in this column. The third and fourth columns are left blank until after the reading. In the third column students will write what they learned about Kahlo from the reading. Afterward students can see if any of their questions from the second column were answered in the third column. The fourth column is for what the students still want to learn. After they have read the information and filled in what they learned, there might still be questions that have not been answered. They might also have new questions that need to be answered. For these questions the students will write what they still want to learn in the fourth column.

I will read this book aloud to the class, stopping and focusing on each page and the illustrations within. For

most of the students this might be the first time of hearing about this famous artist. I want it to be a simple uplifting introduction. After completing the reading, I will have the students complete the third and fourth columns of their KWLS chart.

At this time I will allow students to share with a partner information from their chart. Together they will write one thing they know, one thing they wanted to know, one thing they learned, and one thing they still want to learn. Working with a partner will help eliminate double answers and will allow the students time to share and think with another person. I will provide a large butcher paper with the KWLS chart drawn on it. Each partner will use four Post-It® notes to write each of the four pieces of information. As each group completes their assignment they will come to the butcher paper and stick the notes in the appropriate column. After all groups have completed their assignment we will analyze the information as a class. We will condense our chart by eliminating any notes that are duplicated. After the chart is complete and free of any duplicates we will look at all the information we have learned. We will also discuss information that we still want to learn and discuss ways we can answer those unanswered questions.

Now the students will write a thirty word summary of what they know about Frida Kahlo. This helps synthesize their understanding. I require thirty words to help the students condense their thoughts and only use necessary words.

### **Frida Kahlo by Mike Venezia**

The next book I will read to the class is titled *Frida Kahlo* by Mike Venezia. This book is part of a series titled *Getting to Know the World's Greatest Artists*. This book goes into quite a bit more detail of Kahlo's life than the first book. This book also provides color reproductions of paintings by Kahlo as well as Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and David Alfaro Siqueiros. It is a more in-depth story of Kahlo's life as an adult. It emphasizes the influence of Mexico and the Mexican Revolution in her life. The story focuses more on her art and her influences. One of the best things about this book is the color reproductions of the paintings. The students can really see true artwork and many of the works are directly related to the stories in the book. This is also an introduction to other artists mentioned above. These influential Mexican artists are good for the students to be introduced to. They can then look further into the work of these artists if they are interested.

The activities for this book will be the same as the activities for the previous book. Create a new chart or draw a line and add to the bottom of the current one. The students will complete the first two columns of the KWLS chart. However this time, the first column should have more information contained within it due to the knowledge gained by reading the first book. The second column might mirror some of the things entered into the fourth column from the previous assignment. After these two columns are complete I will read this story to the class. At this time I would like to include some technology into the lesson. Because the artwork in this book is so fantastic and relevant to this story I want all the students to be able to see it. Therefore I will create a slide show of the art contained in this book. By projecting the art onto an overhead screen each student can see an enlarged copy of the art and look at it while listening to the story. I think that when talking about artists, it is very important to include artwork. This unit is designed to incorporate biography studies as well as art appreciation.

There are several ways to create a slide show. The images from the book or even the entire pages can be scanned into the computer. Then you can project those pages onto the overhead. If you don't have access to a scanner then most of these images can be found on the internet. You can download these images into a PowerPoint presentation, or any media you choose, and use that as your slideshow. If you are unfamiliar with the use of these technologies simply ask the technology coordinator at your school for assistance or even



another teacher who is familiar with these programs. In this day and age you can even get a student to do it for you.

As we read the book we will look at the artwork contained within and discuss what is happening in the artwork and in Kahlo's life. At the conclusion of the book we will return to our KWLS chart and complete columns three and four. Again after everyone completes their individual chart the students should return to their partners and discuss what their chart says. Again the partners will create four Post-It® notes and put one item for each column on the notes and then stick the notes onto the big KWLS chart you have provided. In order to separate the two books, you can draw a line underneath the first notes and place the second notes below. This way the students can see the difference in the notes from one book to the next. Again we want to eliminate any duplicates in order to keep our chart simple.

The summarizing assignment will be given again. Maintain the thirty word requirement. Emphasize to the students to summarize Frida Kahlo the person, not Frida Kahlo the book.

### **Comparing Texts**

Now we will begin a discussion on the difference between these two books. The goal is for the students to see that each biographer has a different view and a different way of presenting information. We can discuss reasons why these two stories of one woman are so different. Why would this happen? What is the goal of each biographer? Analyzing text and comparing text is a very important skill that needs to be practiced. If the teacher does not introduce this topic students may not realize that there is such a thing as comparing texts. It is important that they learn to have an objective eye.

Some of the following topics should arise in your discussion. *Frida* was written for a younger audience. It is meant to be a simple story about her and not intended to be weighed down by the heavier topics associated with her life. The artwork is original by Ana Juan but maintains many of the characteristics of Mexican painters by including many of the symbols of the culture. The story ends with emphasizing how Kahlo turns pain into beauty and the last lines of the book are "Long live Frida!" (Winter, 30). This leaves readers to believe she is still alive. In my opinion it was not meant to deceive the children into thinking she is alive and still painting, I believe it is a way that the author portrays that she is still alive through her wonderful artwork. No mention is given to Diego Rivera. This could possibly be because the author wanted to emphasize her as a strong individual and not relate her to her famous husband.

When looking at *Frida Kahlo* we see that the intended audience is somewhat older. Much more of Kahlo's life is given in this story including the Mexican Revolution influence and her marriage to Diego Rivera. It also includes information about her continuing pain as a result of her polio and the bus accident. The artwork included is related to the story the author is telling. Including many of Kahlo's paintings help the students see what she was like as a painter. Including the artwork of painters who have influenced her helps make the story more expansive concerning the Mexican Revolution. There are also some photographs of Kahlo and Rivera which help the students to see what she looked like in real life. Overall this book is more detailed than the first and gives more information about her life. It is not necessarily better but it is different. The biographer wanted to portray her as a real person with real problems and influences. The language is still written simple for young audiences but the paintings carry the audience to an older age.

By comparing these two texts the students will be able to see a whole picture of Frida Kahlo. Both stories offer something unique about her life. Assign the students to individually create a Venn diagram comparing these two books using information we have just discussed. This is a quick assessment for understanding.

## Chronological Order Paragraph and Timeline

The students will now create a timeline of the events from Kahlo's life. Eight events will be provided for the students to cut out and arrange in a timeline form. The events will be included in the unit below. After students have organized their timeline, they will take the information and write a chronological paragraph. The assignment should be one page with correct order of events listed and the chronological summary. They will be required to use time transitional words to combine ideas and events. An alternative on this assignment is to simply have students write each sentence in the correct timeline order and not cut them out. You could have a class set that they refer to or even just one copy projected on the overhead screen.

These events will be provided to the students in a random order.

- Frida is weak from a serious illness called polio.
- She is injured by a terrible bus accident.
- Painting helps her ease her pain.
- Frida meets Diego Rivera while he is painting a mural in her school.
- Frida becomes interested in the folk art of her own country.
- Frida shows Diego some of her artwork to see what he thought.
- Diego and Frida marry.
- Frida learns about the importance of the Mexican Revolution.

These time transitional words will be provided as a guide. The students must include several of these words when writing their chronological paragraph. Examples of these words are: first, before, after, then, while, later, next, previously, afterwards, and during. This is just a sample of the words they need to use to show time transition.

## Teaching About Diego Rivera

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Students will be divided into small groups. One biography of Rivera will be given to each group. You may decide if each group receives the same book or if each group receives a different book. A list of good children's books is provided in the annotated bibliography at the end of this unit. The groups will read the biography they are given of Rivera. Depending on the length, two class periods may be needed. During and after reading the book the students will create a timeline of Rivera's life based on the reading. The timeline should be in a nice project format on some sort of poster board or card stock paper. The background should be relevant to what they learned about Diego Rivera. In other words, a piece of notebook paper isn't what I'm looking for. I would like to see group work, participation, and effort put into this timeline. After the timeline the students will write a chronological summary of the life of Rivera. I assign a chronological summary to get students in the habit of paying attention to detail and dates. Biographies are not always written chronologically so the students will need to rearrange the data. The length of this summary could be a page or two depending on the length of the book read. In addition to the timeline and summary the group will write two cause and effect relationships that took place in Rivera's life. The students will also choose their favorite Rivera painting as a group and show that painting to the class. Most likely this painting will be in the book they have read. If not, you may provide them with some examples of Rivera's work.

## Individual Biographies

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The students will now study a biography individually. They should be ready to handle this non-fiction text on their own because of the previous activities in this lesson. I am looking to use short biographies instead of books. A short two or three page biography should be sufficient for the students to get accustomed to reading a biography on their own. There are several places to find short biographies. The source I will use for this unit is A&E Biography website located at <http://www.biography.com>. They have an expansive listing of 25,000 short biographies. It is best for the teacher to go through and look for ones that are appropriate for the class and that have at least two pages. If the biography is too short, it won't provide enough information for the student to work with. Choose a variety of types of people, from presidents to athletes to artists to inventors. If your school has a computer lab you may want to take the students to the lab and have them choose a person from the list. There they can also print the visuals they plan to use. Require still that the biography be a minimum of two pages.

The students will create a presentation on their assigned person. They should provide a brief chronology of the person's life. A description of a cause and effect relationship about the individual should also be included. Finally, each should write an opinion about why this person is influential. In addition to this information the student will also provide visuals relating to the person. A photographic image must be included, as well as examples of the person's work if they are an artist or architect. These images and the written assignment should be placed on a sheet of construction paper. This will be the visual the student will use in the oral presentation.

The student will present his or her project in front of the class describing the person they researched. Each should explain all three items above: chronology, cause/effect and opinion statement. The presentation should be brief with the purpose of explaining what they have learned and practicing their oral presentation skills. Paraphrasing information is an essential skill that students need to practice.

## Alphabet Autobiography

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Credit for this lesson must be given to Allison Judge at Dunedin High School in Dunedin, Florida. This project allows the students to write an autobiography in a fun and creative way. The students will start by creating twenty-six sections using a couple of pages in their journal or notebook. These need to be labeled corresponding to the twenty-six letters of the alphabet.

Next, students will write one word or phrase describing themselves using each letter of the alphabet. For instance starting with "A": *Apple - My favorite fruit is an apple.* They will continue this brainstorming activity until they have at least two words for each letter. As they decide on each word they should also write it in context given in the example above. This process may expand over parts of several class periods and also be an on-going homework assignment. During this time students will be adding and deleting various ideas. They are to have two words for each letter for the purpose of choice and variety for the next step.

Next the students will narrow the choices to one word or phrase for each letter. Keeping in mind the uniqueness and the describable nature of each word, students should eliminate the choice that will steer their

writing to be plain or boring. They should be looking for areas that are interesting and unique to them.

After each word or phrase has been chosen, students will begin the process of writing a descriptive paragraph about the word. Students should keep in mind that this project is an autobiography and therefore the content must remain factual pertaining to them. However, factual does not mean boring. This is a creative writing skill that needs to be practiced. *I like apples because they are tasty* is a factual but boring sentence. A good creative and descriptive writer would take that same information and express it this way for example, *The sweetness of the apple draws me to it daily*. Again, this process will take several days and the students will need guidance. The paragraph should be three to five sentences. Students will continually work on this assignment for part of class and homework until they have created twenty-six descriptive paragraphs about themselves using the twenty-six letters of the alphabet.

The final product may be done in a variety of ways. I think index cards make a nice booklet. For reasons of conservation and to prevent the book from being too thick to bind, the students should write one letter and paragraph on each side of each index card. Along with this, they should also create a front and back cover for their alphabet autobiography. A good binding technique is to punch one or two holes on the left side of the card and fasten with a brad, ring, or tie with yarn.

Now students have written their own autobiography for themselves and others to enjoy. A nice conclusion to this project is for students to orally present their book. They should show the front and back covers as well as read two or three entries.

## Lesson Plans

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### Frida Kahlo

*Materials:* *Frida* by Jonah Winter, *Frida Kahlo* by Mike Venezia, KWLS chart for each student (or notebook paper), several pads of Post-It® notes, and large sheet of butcher or bulletin paper

*Estimated time:* 45 minutes

*Steps:*

1. Define biography with the students.
2. Distribute one KWLS chart to each student or have each student write their own.
3. Ask students to complete the first two columns on the subject of Frida Kahlo.
4. Read aloud *Frida* by Jonah Winter.
5. Students will complete columns three and four of KWLS chart.
6. Students will share and collaborate with a partner condensing their charts to one entry for each column, written on four Post-It® notes.
7. Each note will be attached to the large butcher paper KWLS chart hanging in the room.
8. Class discussion of items on the chart, eliminating any duplicates.
9. Students will write a brief summary of Frida Kahlo.
10. Create new chart or separate current chart in two for the next book.

11. Ask students to complete the first two columns on the subject of Frida Kahlo.
12. Read aloud *Frida Kahlo* by Mike Venezia.
13. Repeat steps 5 — 9.
14. Discuss differences between texts and author's purpose and intended audience of each book.
15. Assign a Venn diagram comparing and contrasting these two books using the information discussed.

### **Chronological Order Paragraph and Timeline**

*Materials:* worksheet containing eight events from Kahlo's life (provided earlier), a list of time transitional words (some have been provided earlier)

*Estimated time:* 30 minutes

*Steps:*

1. Distribute handout of events in Frida Kahlo's life and handout of time transitional words.
2. Students will cut and organize the events in chronological order in the form of a timeline or simply rewrite them in correct order.
3. Students will use the timeline to write a chronological paragraph of Kahlo's life using time transitional words.

### **Diego Rivera**

*Materials:* Several children's biographies of Diego Rivera (suggestions are listed in the annotated bibliography), cardstock/poster/construction paper, examples of Rivera's work

*Estimated time:* two class periods

*Steps:*

1. Small groups will read biographies of Diego Rivera.
2. Each group will create a visually pleasing timeline of Rivera's life.
3. Each group will write a chronological summary based on the timeline.
4. Each group will write two cause and effect relationships that took place in Rivera's life.
5. Each group will choose their favorite Rivera painting.
6. Oral presentations by each group will be heard.

### **Individual Biographies**

*Materials:* Preprinted pages of short biographies to hand to students, construction paper, glue or staples for attaching information to construction paper

*Estimated time:* Approximately two class periods.

*Steps:*

- Assign each student a person whose biography they will read from the biographies provided by A & E
1. Biography website. (The variation on this is to take the students to the computer lab and they will choose the biography they want to read.)

2. Students will synthesize the information into three parts: chronology of events, cause and effect in the person's life, opinion statement of why the person was influential.
3. The above information will be placed on a sheet of construction paper for presentation purposes.
4. Student will present the information they learned in reading their biography.

### **Alphabet Autobiography**

*Materials:* journal, index cards, fastener (yarn, brad, or ring)

*Estimated time:* two weeks, partly in class and partly at home

*Steps:*

1. In their notebook or journal students will divide a few pages into twenty-six parts and label with the letters of the alphabet.  
Students will write one word or phrase in each section using the appropriate letter and describing themselves. A sentence using the word in context should also be written. Continue this step until each letter contains two words and two corresponding sentences.
2. Students will narrow the choices to one entry per alphabet letter deciding which the better of the two choices is.
3. Students will write one creative and descriptive paragraph for each topic making sure to keep the information truthful. Paragraphs should be three to five sentences.
4. Use both sides of the index card to write each paragraph. One alphabet letter and paragraph per side.
5. Students will create front and back covers.
6. Bind the books.
7. Students will orally present the covers and three sections of the book.

## **Appendix**

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### **Texas State Teaching Objectives — Grade 6 - Reading**

#### *Listening and Speaking*

ELA.L.6.01.a — Listen effectively in a variety of settings for a variety of purposes. (Listening to read alouds of Frida Kahlo books.)

ELA.L.6.01.b — Interact effectively for a variety of purposes. (Working together in groups to complete Diego Rivera assignment.)

ELA.L.6.02.e — Interpret and evaluate written and oral texts. (Comprehension of all biographies presented.)

ELA.L.6.02.g — Speak with increasing command of English. (Oral presentations of Diego Rivera assignment, Individual Biography assignment and Alphabet Autobiography assignment.)

ELA.L.6.03.c — Prepare, organize and deliver a variety of oral presentations. (Oral presentations of Diego Rivera, Individual Biography and Alphabet Autobiography.)

## *Reading*

ELA.R.6.01.b — Read with fluency and understanding in texts at appropriate difficulty levels. (Reading of Diego Rivera books as well as brief biographies of various people.)

ELA.R.6.02.a — Describe and compare the characteristics of a variety of texts, forms and genres. (Study of non-fiction biographies.)

ELA.R.6.02.b — Identify the purposes for which text is written. (Determining the purpose for each Frida Kahlo biography.)

ELA.R.6.02.e — Analyze expository text structure and its features. (Determining chronological order in Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera biographies.)

ELA.R.6.05.d — Summarize texts for a variety of purposes. (Summaries of Frida Kahlo, Diego Rivera, and individual biographies)

ELA.R.6.05.e — Identify causes and effects from a piece of text. (Write cause and effect events from Frida Kahlo's life and Diego Rivera's life.)

ELA.R.6.05.g — Evaluate text for point of view, propaganda, and to distinguish fact from opinion. (Must write opinion of why the person they researched is famous. All information in Alphabet Autobiography must be factual.)

ELA.R.6.06.b — Compare and contrast features of text. (Determine author's point of view for Frida Kahlo books.)

## *Writing*

ELA.W.6.02.b — Produce cohesive written forms. (Several written summaries as well as written Alphabet Autobiography.)

ELA.W.6.03.b — Use accurate punctuation in written forms of communication. (All written assignments must be correctly punctuated.)

ELA.W.6.03.c — Write with accurate capitalization in written forms of communication. (All assignments must be correctly capitalized.)

ELA.W.6.03.d — Write with accurate spelling and use knowledge of spelling to revise compositions. (All assignments must be correctly spelled.)

ELA.W.6.04.a — Write in complete sentences varying sentence structure. (All assignments must be grammatically correct.)

# Annotated Bibliography

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## Works Cited

Krull, Kathleen. *Lives of the Artists: Masterpieces, Messes (and What the Neighbors Thought)*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1995.

This is a great collection of sixteen biographies of famous artists. Each biography is approximately four pages and includes illustrations. It provides accurate and brief information about the artist as well as an unusual fact about them. This book is mainly used for the biographies of Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo for the purposes of this unit. 96 pages.

Rivera, Diego. *My Art, My Life: An Autobiography*. 1960. New York: Dover Publications, 1991.

An autobiography of Diego Rivera calculating his life and many accomplishments as well as defeats. This is said to be full of embellishments to his actual life. This particular version has been typographically reset and adjusted but is true to the original which was published in 1960 by Citadel Press. 197 pages.

Winter, Jonah. *Frida*. New York: Scholastic Press, 2002.

This picture book tells the story of Kahlo mostly from her young life. It includes the events of her accident and emphasizes her love for painting. It is wonderfully illustrated and emphasizes Kahlo as a strong female and an art lover. 28 pages.

## Supplemental Sources

### *Student Sources*

Bankston, John. *Latinos in American History: Diego Rivera*. Hockessin: Mitchell Lane, 2004.

An informative biography that includes well written, easy to understand information about Rivera. It includes some photos and reproductions of Rivera's work. It is lengthy on the narrative but easy to follow. Great source for kids. A chronology of Rivera's life and a timeline of relevant world events are included. 48 pages.

Biography on A&E. <http://www.biography.com>

An expansive list of 25,000 short biographies of various people.

Cruz, Bárbara C. *Frida Kahlo: Portrait of a Mexican Painter*. Berkeley Heights: Enslow Publishers, 1996.

There are no color images in this book but several black and white ones. A very detailed timeline is included in the back. 112 pages.

Garza, Hedda. *Hispanics of Achievement: Frida Kahlo*. New York: Chelsea House, 1994.

A richly detailed account of Kahlo's life. There are nine color plates and the rest of the images are black and white. Overall the book is a great personal account of who Kahlo was. A nice timeline is included. 119 pages.

Hargrove, Jim. *Diego Rivera: Mexican Muralist*. Chicago: Childrens Press, 1990.

This is an informative book on Rivera's life. The one element lacking is the photos. They are all black and white and there are very few of them. Having said this, it is nicely packed with narrative and full of information. It will take some time for a student to read



through all of it. A dense and detailed timeline of Rivera's life is included. 127 pages.

Kent, Deborah. *Diego Rivera: Painting Mexico*. Chanhassen: The Child's World, 2005.

A short, easy to read biography with many color reproductions. A brief timeline is included. This book also includes a nice glossary of newly introduced words. 40 pages.

—. *Frida Kahlo: An Artist Celebrates Life*. Chanhassen: The Child's World, 2004.

40 pages.

An in-depth, informative book about Kahlo's life. Beginning with her childhood and continuing through her death, Deborah Kent chronicled the joys and sorrows of Kahlo's interesting life. It is easy to read for young adults. Included in the back is a timeline of major events as well as a glossary of newly introduced words.

Morrison, John. *The Great Hispanic Heritage: Frida Kahlo*. Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 2003.

A good read of Kahlo's life full of color reproductions. Each reproduction is explained in detail in the caption. 110 pages.

Venezia, Mike. *Getting to Know the World's Greatest Artists: Diego Rivera*. Chicago: Childrens Press, 1994.

This full color biography provides great information about the life of Diego Rivera. It includes information about his influences and his role in the Mexican Revolution. Original artwork by Rivera is included as well as artwork from other famous Mexican artists. 32 pages.

—. *Getting to Know the World's Greatest Artists: Frida Kahlo*. New York: Grolier Publishing, 1999.

This full color biography provides great information about the life of Frida Kahlo. It includes information about the Mexican Revolution and about Diego Rivera. Original artwork by Kahlo is included as well as artwork from other famous Mexican artists. 32 pages.

Winter, Jonah. *Diego*. New York: Dragonfly Books, 1991.

A very simple book about the childhood of Diego Rivera. The unique aspect of this book is that the text is both English and Spanish. 32 pages.

### *Teacher Sources*

Fuentes, Carlos. Introduction. *The Diary of Frida Kahlo: An Intimate Self-Portrait*. By Frida Kahlo. New York: Abradale Press, 1995.

An informative teacher read for background information. Kahlo's entries are in Spanish but there are also many of her sketchings included. It is full color. Included is the English translation of Kahlo's words. 296 pages.

Herrera, Hayden. *Frida Kahlo: The Paintings*. New York: Harper Collins, 1991.

Many say that this is the book that brought Kahlo to the world in the early nineties and really gave her recognition among many who hadn't heard of or weren't familiar with her. 255 pages.

Kahlo, Frida. *Letters of Frida Kahlo*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1995.

These are wonderful and intimate letters by Kahlo to various people. The same way that Kahlo expressed herself through her art, she also expressed herself through her letters to others. The book only includes the English translation. 159 pages.

Lozano, Luis-Martin. *Frida Kahlo*. Boston: Bulfinch Press, 2000.

This very large book, approximately 13" by 12", is full of color reproductions of Kahlo's work. Most of the images are displayed on several pages that include close-up details of the paintings. There is quite a bit of narrative that accompanies the images. Kahlo's life is well documented. Some of the images would be great to show to students because the book is so large. A word of caution, many of the images are not appropriate for school aged children so the book should not be given for browsing. This is just the nature of Kahlo's work. 245 pages.

Marnham, Patrick. *Dreaming With His Eyes Open: A Life of Diego Rivera*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1998.

A richly detailed biography of Rivera. Good for background information for teachers. 350 pages.

Rochfort, Desmond. *Mexican Muralists: Orozco, Rivera, Siqueiros*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books: 1993.

A look into the very famous three Mexican muralists. This is included just to expand the research beyond Rivera. 239 pages.

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