



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative

2006 Volume IV: Native America: Understanding the Past through Things

The Circle of Life

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Introduction

"Everything an Indian does in a circle, and that is because the power of the world always works in circles, and everything tries to be round. In the old days when we were a strong and happy people, all our power came to us from the sacred hoop of the nation, and so long as the hoop was unbroken the people flourished" (Neihardt 150).

Richard Townsend said in *Hero, Hawk, and Open Hand: American Indian Art of the Ancient Midwest and South*, that the book sought "an understanding of the way different societies defined themselves and their environment through the symbolism and expressive power of art, architecture, and ritual performance" (19). He said that these dominant symbolic expressions of humanity will identify and interpret the ancient society. I believe those exact things can identify and interpret present society, albeit with profoundly different art, architecture, and ritual with profoundly different meaning. They each have their own story.

The Chris Eyre film *Smoke Signals* was released in 1998 amidst a flurry of critical acclaim and a host of film awards including the Audience award at the Sundance Film Festival and Best Film at the American Indian Film Festival. Its beauty, poignancy, and poetry enraptured me and led to further investigation of its creators. American Indian author Sherman Alexie wrote the screenplay based on his collection of short stories *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fist Fight in Heaven*. His unbridled and unfettered look at life on an Indian reservation is both disturbing and comforting. Disturbing in that the alcoholism, stereotype, poverty, violence, and hopelessness prevalent on his reservation seem hidden from the rest of the world; comforting in that the alcoholism, stereotype, poverty, violence, hopelessness is the world of many of our students. It's a story they may relate to and at the same time expand their tolerance of others with the knowledge that we share the same human strife. It may give them their voice for their own story.

I initially thought that a study of ancient American Indian artifacts might offer an opportunity to connect to modern day things my students hold in esteem. I thought that looking at ancient tools, burial mounds, religious, and spiritual artifacts would allow me to categorize the art, architecture, and ritual in Alexie's stories to illuminate their similarities with the past. Then I became stuck, mired in things I couldn't really connect, in an interesting way really. I pondered over the ancient images and symbols and tools and bones and made a simple revelation; these things make a great story.

So, what started as an examination of the American Indian reservation life through the lens of one author, Sherman Alexie, has ultimately become the personal story along with Sherman Alexie. I chose only one author not necessarily because I feel he is the only voice or the most authentic or the one least likely to perpetuate a stereotype. I chose him because he is a great story-teller. His stories are personal. The reader hears his voice loud and clear. I chose him because his short stories are courageous in their honesty. I chose him because of the challenges facing American Indians are not dissimilar to our own outside the Rez. In fact, the stories of the Rez and the Hood could be one and the same. But, mostly I chose him because of *Smoke Signals*. While the hopelessness of poverty and violence seem insurmountable, the film offers a profound ray of hope. Not in the typical against all odds Horatio Alger type of ending, but an ending that convinces there is indeed no hope if hatred and anger are present. My students often feel that they are without hope. They need a story and they need to tell theirs.

Rationale

The Ancient Story

American Indian history is extraordinary for so many reasons, not the least of which is their tragic demise and relocation in the 19th century. It's a history that is frequently misguided and misinformed. It's a history that is romanticized and mythologized. It is a history that is demonized in order to justify the unjustifiable. It's a story that pretty much starts and finishes with the great pilgrim Thanksgiving. There is one story that I want my students to hear and see. This one seems rather accurate.

The Moundbuilders, ancient peoples of North America, falls neatly into the category "Things I Would Have Learned in School had I Been Paying Attention." In fact, when I was introduced to the Moundbuilders via a video a graduate professor made me watch, I was awe-struck. In fact, I am a little embarrassed to say that I, probably much like my students, had no idea of human existence in North America much earlier than 1492. Perhaps I can make that statement worse. It's not so much that I had no idea of human existence in North America much earlier than 1492; it's that I really never gave it much thought.

It will be interesting to ask the students to draw a picture of Native Americans before 1492. I believe I would be safe in the assumption that most drawings would look the same. A tipi scattered here or there, Indian Braves with one feather sticking out of their head, perhaps a student with a penchant for the macabre would even draw a scalping, the savage raping and pillaging the helpless pioneer. What else do the students know? How long ago were Native Americans walking on the ground right under our feet? How many were there?

There is a site in Missouri, the Kimmiswick Mound, in which archeologists unearthed bones of an extinct mastodon along side two intact Clovis points, and stone projectiles that were attached to an atlatl or spear (Milner 27). It's called the Paleoindian era, somewhere between 9 and 10,000 years BCE. It's a thought provoking way to start, a good bit earlier than the first Thanksgiving.

According to the American Heritage Dictionary of English Language, 2004 edition, the archeological definition of mound is "a large pile of earth or stones often marking a burial site." This, in my opinion, is the understatement of the decade when you consider what Charles C. Mann wrote in *1491: New Revelations of the Americas before Columbus*;

Anyone who traveled up the Mississippi in 1100AD would have seen it looming in the distance: a four level earthen mound bigger than the Great Pyramid of Giza. Around it like echoes were as many as 120 smaller mounds, some topped by tall wooden palisades, which were in turn ringed by a network of irrigation and transportation canals; carefully located fields of maize; and hundreds of red-and-white-plastered wood homes with high-peaked, deeply thatched roofs (252).

That is a description of the Indian city of Cahokia in Illinois. I love that description and think that it is an incredible writing opportunity for students to read and view an image of Monks Mound in the Cahokia village and try to write as if they were seeing it for the first time like Lewis and Clark. The area was inhabited sometime before AD 800 and we don't know what these people actually called themselves and we don't know what language they spoke. According to Mann what we do know with a degree of certainty is that this "initial group belonged to a diverse, four-thousand-year-old tradition characterized by the construction of large earthen mounds." (254).

Up and down the Mississippi, from southern Canada all across the Midwest and southeastern United States tens of thousands of these mounds exist or did exist. Americans have known about the mounds or at least noticed them from the days of Lewis and Clarke and in fact, Thomas Jefferson had one in his back yard. But little interest, at least archeological interest was placed on these sites until the 19th century.

How did American Indians build these things? When you think about the tools available and consider the population, the mounds are really a stunning and perplexing achievement. Although only a small number of these mounds have been studied, most of them are earthworks in shapes like cones, pyramids, big birds, alligators, and snakes consisting of nothing but earth. Like Stonehenge, we don't really know what some were used for or why they were built. But many of them had stuff in them. What about the mounds that had things in them and the ones with bones? What kind of stories do these things tell?

Things

The artifacts found in these mound sites all across the country but particularly in the southeastern United States bear powerful images. Archeologists have largely determined what many of the artifacts were used for and their meaning. How can we really know? The completely untrained archeological brain may immediately summon up Disney's *The Little Mermaid*, when the Scuttle, the sea gull explains the uses of what you and I call a fork, as a "dingle-hopper," used for hair styling, and the pipe which Scuttle insists is a "banded-bulbous-snarblatt" used to make beautiful music. . .or a planter.

One way for less than amateur archeologists to make sense out of these artifacts so we can begin to hear their story is to categorize them using the information around them and on them. Townsend first identified themes or categories found in the artifacts of the ancient Midwest and Southern United States over a three-thousand-year span of time (19).

Cosmic and Social Order

The idea of the American Indians connection to the earth and all living creatures did not necessarily evolve in a vacuum. Although not the only peoples of the ancient world to believe in this type of life connection, they saw their world as a network which spread from their communities "into the life of animals and plants, leading to the powers inherent in rivers, rocks, mountains, and other phenomena of the earth and sky, and the remote, immaterial, all powerful forces of life, death, and renewal" (21). How did these ancient people tell time? Their worlds were inextricably connected to the rising and setting sun and the passing of the seasons.

Planting, cultivating, harvesting, hunting are all a part of the circle of life if you will. Summer people or "feather people" are represented by the hawk and summer activities. Winter people are represented by the cat, the "fur people."

There are beautiful things which represent these beliefs. The Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of the American Indian, has an image of a shell gorget (a gorget is an ornament worn around the neck). This particular one has the carved images of a feline and a hawk facing each other that was worn as a symbol of high office in the society as well as symbolizing the two-part division of society, summer and winter (Townsend 20).

We often associate feather headdresses with the chief of a tribe or of high status. Many times the headdresses had more than feathers on them. For example some were decorated with small sheet-copper status symbols cut into different shapes. The Copper Bird Claw Status Symbol found in Bartow County, Georgia, at first glance, looks like some sort of tool or weapon. But, indeed it symbolizes status in the society and there are many other types of headdress accessories including shells and deer antlers (Power 120).

Domains of the Hunt and the Animal Powers

Bannerstones have been found all over the United States including Florida. These simple shaped and polished stones made from beautiful quartzes and other materials functioned as weights for spear-throwers (Townsend 22-23). While their exact significance is uncertain, they may have served as status symbols themselves, used in coming of age rituals, or simply increased the throwers skill and success at hunting.

Animals have instinct. Because of this and because they lived in the land outside the human society, hunters and gatherers believed the animals were closer to the all powerful forces of the world. They viewed animals as much more than a source of food and materials. Calling animal spirits and stories of turning into animals to garner their power and instinct are evident in these artifacts. A wood carving found in Collier County, Florida, in the Keys is an intriguing example. It is a human-cat figure kneeling the way that a human would but clearly with the slender back and head of a cat. And the feline, remember is associated with the "fur people," the winter and the earth. The relationship seen between human and animal is a powerful one and one that is told in many of the artifacts with an endless possibility of story (Townsend 28).

Gods and Heroes

Gods and Heroes in every culture across history across the globe are some of the greatest stories of all. American Indians were like other ancient cultures in their quest to explain the unexplainable, to call upon sources greater than themselves for good fortune, success in battle or in the hunt. Unlike some of the Greek or Roman gods, some of these figures remain a mystery. This gives us great leeway to create their stories.

The Blind Wolf Pipe dating back to 400 AD found in Tennessee is a beautiful smooth jet black stone with a wolf clinging on the round tube as it might cling to a log or crouch in the brush. What makes this pipe so interesting is that the wolf has no eyes but its stature looks as if it can see through and into everything and everyone it faces. A Human effigy pipe found in Ohio is carved with symbols that indicate high status. It may represent a hero or ruling family. The students will love the ear-spools (Townsend 30-31).

The Worship of Ancestors

As with all of these categories, you can easily see how even our things today could find a home and the

ancestor worship is no different. It makes perfect sense when you recall the first category that addressed the cosmic and social order. All things connected, all journeying to a place of death and renewal, all connected in the network. The southern US tribes have the most enchanting belief of the dead; they believe that the constellation Orion was an open hand and was a gathering place for the souls of the dead on their way to join others as stars in the Milky Way (Townsend 33).

Ancestral monuments contain the most stuff, human effigies watching over the dead, beads, offerings, and of course the artifacts which identified the social standing. In our culture today, we do many things to honor the dead including visiting the gravesite to place flowers, to ponder, or to speak to the departed in whispers. American Indians had feasts at the monuments to celebrate their lineage and clan.

Here I am going to stray just a bit from the North American Indian because I must include some images of "mummy bundles" of the Inca. The Incas situate their dead in a squatting position then wrap them up in cloth. They wrapped and wrapped and wrapped and of course the type of cloth and the colors of the cloth identified a social status. These images are extraordinary. What the students may also get engaged with is that the Inca would prop their mummy bundles up, take them out, take them to dinner, and parade them around at festivals to keep the ancestors connected to the living. The manner in which they wrapped the head is also intriguing. Most attention is paid to the cloth wrapping the head and why might that be? The head is the most important part of the body; it's the part that holds thought and emotion. Great care was taken to adorn the head. The images are spectacular.

Personal Story Telling

Marketers are winning. Action-packed, flashy colors, entertainment stars, names on the shoes and jackets, food, and price it all at a couple of hundred dollars, and my students will focus intently for days. And they will be proud, proud to wear it, proud to own it, and they feel good for just a while until the carbs wear off and they have to go get some more things. There will be more things fast and furious. Just in time.

How can our profession compete with this fast-food computer game, Ipod world of things? There are a number of ways as you know from your own classroom. The crucial issue is to engage the student with relevancy and immediate application to something other than just their English class. As I have looked back at ancient things and tried to take the student on an imaginary journey to the stories behind those things, I believe it is time to take the stories home and make them personal.

The Power of Personal Story I will tell you something about stories, [he said] They aren't just entertainment. Don't be fooled. They are all we have, you see, All we have to fight off Illness and death (Silko 2).

Your own written words bring identity and voice. In a world when voices are shouted at us incessantly and we demand immediate communication of information but not too much because there are other things that I have to look at and I am not really listening to you because there is something catching my attention out of the corner of my eye and all I am really thinking about is my own misery and I don't really care about yours and I really have to go now. I agree with Lynn Nelson (2000), a 20 year veteran English teacher who wrote in the *English Journal*, that by beginning with the student's personal story, the student will feel meaningful. If there is another human actually listening (reading) to the story, the student is validated.

Thomas Builds-the-Fire in Sherman Alexie's *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fist Fight in Heaven* is the story-teller but no one listens to his stories. He tells them over and over to any creature that will listen but no one will.

This ultimately keeps him on the brink of the depths of alcoholism. "Thomas was a story-teller nobody wanted to listen to. That's like being a dentist in a town where everybody has false teeth" (61). In contrast, Alexie's Thomas Builds-the-Fire character in *Smoke Signals* is distinctively different. While Victor doesn't want to listen to Thomas' stories either, Thomas persists and seems unfazed at Victor's disdain for his stories. It is ultimately Thomas who leads Victor on his journey of discovery. I think both versions of this story-teller are important; one cannot survive without a listener and the other never gives up. But the stories are personal which is precisely why Victor can't bear to hear them.

This unit has focused on things, very old things with stories behind them. Some we know, some we don't, but it won't matter to us. We are going to look at these things and imagine another life and create another story. We are going to put ourselves in Cahokia and describe it. We will read Alexie's stories, identifying the literary devices he masterfully and simply uses. And when we are good and comfortable, we are going to write our own stories and create our own things.

Nelson's article was passionate about the value of a personal story and I simply must include more of her words regarding this. "Violence is itself a form of communication, a form turned to when 'authentic communication' is denied" (May as cited by Nelson, 44). "Authentic communication" must have a listener, and that listener is me and you, the teachers.

Context

My 9th grade English students can read. Their test scores say that 75% of them read below grade level (Duval County Public Schools). Some way below. But, they can read. Their eyes can move from left to right, follow each line, and they can hear the words in their heads as they read. My students hate to read. Who wouldn't when you can move your eyes from left to right, follow each line, hear the words in your head but after two paragraphs you have no idea what you just read? The metacognitive reasons are many not the least of which is that while their eyes are moving from left to right, following each line, hearing the words in their heads, they are also hearing every other thought that pops into their heads like a two year old pulling on their mental pants leg begging and pleading, "Look at me! Look at me!" And my students like many parents, look. They hope in vain to placate the noisy youngster. But it doesn't and my students are defeated. There are a wealth of reasons for this travesty; the socio-economic factor, family factor or lack thereof, the undiagnosed disability, the boredom, and a host of other factors make reading painful, frustrating, and tortuous at the very least.

The demographics of my school are interesting. It is situated in the Northeast section of Jacksonville. I-95 cuts the area just about exactly in half, 46% black urban and 54% white rural. Less than one percent of our students are Asian or Hispanic. This rural section of the school's reach is in the midst of tremendous growth. Indeed, the growth crosses the highway where new sub-divisions, Super Wal-Marts, movie theatres, and malls are changing the landscape of north Florida on a daily basis. The demographics are changing, the school is bursting at the seams, and the students are reacting to the tension that change inevitably brings. It is as if the faculty and staff are trying to run up the down escalator just make it through the day. We ultimately succumbed to that futile effort this year and our precarious "C" to which we had been barely holding onto slipped below the water's choppy surface to a "D." Motivating unmotivated students who, as much as they say they don't care, are secretly ashamed of their school. Building community and making our curriculum relevant

to them *right now* is our only hope.

Strategies

Lesson 1: What Things Do I Have?

Explanations

In order to make a smooth connection to our American Indian theme, I want the students to categorize their things just as Townsend categorized the artifacts of the Moundbuilders. I think it will be an interesting exercise for the students to take ownership for creating their categories then seeing the same in artifacts from hundreds even thousands of years ago.

This lesson consists primarily of basic guided questioning by the teacher utilizing things in the classroom especially things students may be wearing. As we define the categories as a class, I will color code them. Because I plan on teaching this unit at the beginning of the year, I intend to include the parents in this exercise. The students will be asked to go home and ask their parent or guardian to pick one of their own things; it could be something special, something sacred, or something ordinary that gets used daily. The student and the parent/guardian can discuss the different categories, decide into which the thing falls, then write a description on an index card. If possible, they can take a picture of it or draw it. The parents will be invited to present their thing to the class but if that is not possible, the student will do so and attach the card under the category to which it belongs. Keep in mind that part of the beauty of this exercise is that some items will not neatly fit into just one category. Therefore, there may be a great deal of discussion.

After 6 classes of, hopefully, only 25 students each, we should have a colorful wall filled with things that are connected to the students and a relative who has lived longer than they.

Lesson 2: Look at the Art and Tell the Story

Explanations

The beauty of this exercise, which I learned from Dr. Richard Chant at the University of North Florida, is that it can be used with just about any unit at any time. You'll need to choose several paintings. One that I will use is "*Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way*" (see Teacher resources for image website) to get them in the Native American mood. Its subject matter is the pioneer march to the west and the implication that the expansion was somehow justified by a higher being.

View the painting with the students and take them through the colors, the texture, and the sense of movement the artists conveys. What was the first thing they noticed? Where do you think the characters are? Who are the characters? When was this? What do you think of it?

On a regular size paper, trace the outline of the characters in the painting and number them. Give each student a copy and assign each student a character. One by one ask who they are. What are they doing? What might they be feeling right now? What do you think they would say right at this moment? Then write it down. Do that with each character and when you are finished you have a script.

Place the students, physically, in the same position or stance as their character and when everyone is set, read the script from start to finish. It works beautifully and the students will have not only analyzed a piece of art, but they have also written dialogue that matches the setting and a story has begun. I suggest that you do this in groups of about 10 or so at a time with several different paintings that fit into the theme.

Lesson 3: The Ancient Things

Explanations

This lesson will connect the ancient things to all of those categories we described earlier and to all of the things the students brought in themselves. It must be image rich. I have included some stable websites in the resource section of this unit from which to draw, but the wealth of images on the internet is staggering. You may wish to expand this unit from the North American Indian to include the Mesoamerican and further. There is a wealth of images available.

This section will use slides and music. As a class we will view the slides I have chosen and categorize them, discuss the markings, make guesses as to their uses, or who might have worn them or owned them. We will bring in all the symbolism discussed in the Justification of this unit regarding the ancient things and we will connect them, if possible to our own world.

I will spend more time on the Ancestor Worship section because of the relevance to the students' lives today. There is a relatively new phenomenon that has swept some urban areas of the country, including Jacksonville, in which T-shirts and/or Hoodies are emblazoned with the deceased's picture, birth and death date, and most often a statement of love or mourning. Those wearing these effigy shirts wear them proudly and as if to take some comfort from it. National Public Radio aired a commentary on June 26, 2006, by reporter Desiree Cooper of the Detroit Free Press headlined "Being Unsettled by Flashy Funerals for the Young." In this report she describes a mile one traffic jam due to the funeral of a young person who died violently. Noting that there are more and more inner city funerals for young people, she made an interesting statement that it disturbed her because it seemed that in these funerals the worth of the deceased seemed to be determined by the extravagance of the funeral rather than the good deeds of the deceased. Between the service and the internment, friends will dash to the local mall to buy dog-tags with the image of their dead friend; some collect them like charms. People put cigarettes in the casket, cash, bullets, or beer. She wonders if young people have lost respect for the dead or if this is similar to the Jazz Funerals of New Orleans or an Irish Wake. I am wondering if it is not a resurgence of an ancient tradition.

Death, especially violent deaths seem as prevalent today as in the ancient world and those stories may be the most personal and the most poignant the students can have. But this particular lesson will ask the students to categorize some of these ancient artifact images, choose one, describe and discuss the symbolisms and metaphors, and then write a story that goes along with it.

Lesson 4: Because My Father Always Said He was the Only Indian who saw Jimi Hendrix Play "The Star Spangled Banner" at Woodstock

Explanations

Before we get started with the short story, I am going to introduce a discussion based on our perceptions of the American Indian. This will have most assuredly already come up as we were writing stories about artifacts, but I want to include a non-fiction text that will challenge some long held beliefs as well as help the students

to understand the author's point of view, purpose, and tone. It is an article in a special edition of *American Indian Quarterly* in which the author is clearly frustrated at what she feels is a great injustice in recording American Indian history. Wilson emphatically admonishes a field she says is "dominated by white, male, historians who rarely ask or care what the Indians they study have to say about their work" (3). For my students, I will read this with them with a graphic organizer to draw out these elements. For advanced level students, that may not be necessary.

My Father Always said he was the only Indian to hear Jimi Hendrix play the "Star Spangled Banner" at Woodstock is the first Alexie short story we will read. For my 9th graders, it will be important for me to offer a little background of Woodstock and Jimi Hendrix. Most will not have much background knowledge of either. It will be helpful to introduce some of the music, especially Jimi Hendrix and images of Woodstock. In order to begin, I will show the students just the opening song in the movie *Hair* starring Treat Williams and Beverly De'Angelo, Aquarius. It illustrates the 60's hippie movement beautifully not only with the dress, but with dance choreographed by Twyla Tharpe. In addition to '60's music, I will introduce some Blues as well, Robert Johnson specifically because he is mentioned in this story and John Lee Hooker personally just because I am a fan.

Up until now, the students have responded to visual images, symbolism, and metaphor. They have been describing these things, these very old things and their own things using similes. Hopefully now they can recognize those devices in the written word and feel confident enough to tackle the more difficult devices such as irony, irony and simile all in one place, sarcasm, and the deep resonance of an oxymoron. This story is filled with these items, plus the tenuous relationship between a son and his father, the despair of man who is hopeless, and while this story is told by Victor, in *Smoke Signals*, it is told by Thomas-Builds-the-Fire in a "fine example of the oral tradition."

Lesson 6: This is What it Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona

Explanations

The second Alexie story we will read is *This is what it means to say Phoenix, Arizona*. This is the story from which *Smoke Signals* was actually born. It is the story of the death of Victor's father and the journey to retrieve his ashes. This will be a continuation of examining the literary devices Alexie uses, identifying them, and understanding them.

There are a few things in particular that are crucial to the connections made in this unit. It is important to point out how Thomas-Builds-the-Fire begins to be portrayed as somewhat mystical, magical. He knew Victor's father was going to leave. He shows up on Victor's door step just as Victor was going to seek him out. In Alexie's short stories Thomas is seen mostly as the town joke, bullied, and disparaged. But this story shines a little different light on Thomas and it is that aspect which is carried over into the film.

Second, Victor's father, Arnold Joseph was cremated. He was such a big man all his ashes wouldn't fit into just one box. I think the ashes in the cardboard box are significant. If we look back at the burial mounds and the things buried in them, it is a stark contrast to this American Indian, burned and poured in two cardboard boxes. What does that say about his life? Why is it significant that Thomas gets to keep the smaller box? Does it seem to matter to Victor or Thomas that the ashes are in a box? Does that lessen the sacredness of Victor's dad's remains?

Lesson 7: Field Trip to Ft. George/Huguenot Park

Explanations

Not twenty minutes from our high school is Fort George Island Cultural State Park. It is the southernmost barrier island in the long chain of islands along the southeast United States Coast. Located at where the Nassau and St. Johns River basins meet, it is a site that has had human occupation for 7,000 years (Ft. George Island Cultural State Park). In fact, the Rangers there tell me the whole island is in fact one big shell midden, or ancient trash heap. The mounds contain remnants of food that was consumed, broken pottery, and other everyday items of the day that would normally wind up in the trash. But bones and all sorts of artifacts have been found there as well.

Middens such as this one hold many, many stories of every day life and I want to take my students there with a guided Ranger. This trip will accomplish several things. First, it will make *real* the pictures, images, and stories we have heard up until now. Second, it will give them an opportunity to begin collecting their own things for their final project. We will take direction from the Rangers as to where to collect shells so as to preserve any ancient deposits. There are so many of these mounds across the country, it is likely that others reading this unit may find one to visit as well. Huguenot Park is a 450 acre horseshoe shaped area surrounded by three bodies of water, Ft. George Inlet, the St. Johns River, and the Atlantic Ocean just minutes from our school. It is an ideal place for shelling especially if we happen to be able to go after a storm. Many of the beautiful shells land on the shore here intact, whereas mostly small shells and shell pieces that land on the Jacksonville Beaches. This area, although not a historically preserved site, will allow the students to collect all kinds of shells and things without the possibility of destroying archeological sites.

Lesson 8: Smoke Signals

Explanations

Ideally after such a unit, I would like to view the film on the large screen in the auditorium in its entirety. If that is not possible, I will use an LCD projector rather than view this on a small television. The cinematography is extraordinary.

I will begin with a poem by Sherman Alexie, *Why We Play Basketball*. and "We played ball/until dark, then played/until we could see/neither hoop nor ball. We played until our/mothers and fathers/came searching for us/and carried us home" (709-710). The basketball is an important thing in *Smoke Signals* and it is an important thing to my students. The simple manner in which Alexie discusses the love for playing basketball is more than just a sport. It is a way to escape the hunger and poverty of life for young Indians. But, like many childhood things it rolls to the corner and love and family encompass life. The love of basketball never dies and neither does the love for the small house and large family and the fights the crowd inevitably with share.

I will follow Alexie's poem with one by Dick Lourie, *Forgiving our Fathers*. Lourie is not an American Indian but is a writer, poet and blues musician. His and Alexie's works have been published in many of the same journals and magazines. It is Lourie's poem that concludes *Smoke Signals*. A slight variation of *Forgiving our Fathers* is the ending narration by Thomas-Builds-the-Fire and it most poignantly is the metaphor, really for the entire film. The poem asks the simple question; when do we forgive our fathers, "in our age or in theirs or in their deaths/ saying it to them or not saying it—if we forgive our fathers what is left" (48). I am not going to tell the students that they will hear it again in the film; I want them to study the poetry just knowing that the film focuses on the relationship of Victor and his father. With that fresh in their minds, I believe the connection will

be more valuable even palpable.

The students will have an active watching guide, a graphic organizer if you will, to make notes upon as they watch the film. First it will begin with a part of Thomas-Builds-the-Fire's narration "Victor and I were made of flame and ash," so that the students can capture the metaphor and describe what it means. It will include character descriptions, examples of literary devices, and predictions.

There are several things that I want the students to pay special attention to, hair being the first. What is the significance of hair to Victor? Does it mean the same thing to Thomas? Does it matter? Arnold, Suzy Song, and Victor all at different points in the film say I/he "didn't mean to." What does that mean each time? What about Arnold's basketball? Why doesn't Victor bring that home?

Ultimately, I find the ending so simple it is extraordinary. Thomas ends up as the guiding light for Victor which is in stark contrast to the Thomas portrayed in the written text. It is his Mason jar full of money that makes possible Victor's reconciliation with his father and himself. Arnold Joseph was responsible for Thomas' parent's death, yet the act of giving Thomas some of Arnold's ashes in the same Mason jar is sublime. In addition, the death of Arnold Joseph and his remains is in stark contrast to the burial artifacts and rituals archeologists have uncovered from North American Indians here in the southeast. It is also in stark contrast to the funeral frenzy Desiree Cooper speaks of in Detroit. I believe all of these are worthy of discussion and thought.

I will guide students as needed through the film but it is my intention to let them discover these things on their own and without interruption. If we need to revisit scenes we will afterward, but at this point they have had a solid background and preparation to be able to understand the simple treasures in this movie. That will be evidenced by the guide that they use to watch the film.

Lesson 9: Make Your Thing and Write Your Story

Explanations

This is it. This is the culmination of the unit. We have gathered items and ideas and other people's stories and now it is time to make our own. We will take a day to construct our thing, decorate it as we wish, name it, and describe the symbols. Then they will write their personal story. While we will adhere to the writing standards involving pre-writing strategies, drafts and editing, it is my hope that the exercise with the background of the unit, will either unlock a talent or love of writing or at the very least convince the students that they can indeed write a coherent and thought provoking passage with higher level literary devices. Tell me a story.

Classroom Activities

Objectives

This unit will focus on the nature and the power of language. Specifically, Florida Sunshine State Standards regarding Language and Literature. In the lesson plans that follow, the standards will be listed and there is an annotated list of Standards at the end of this unit. Even though I am going to do this through the examination of animate objects, I will use those things to help the student understand and recognize literary devices which are so crucial to comprehension. This unit will go beyond the most basic level of comprehension, the

fundamental events in a story or a film. It will seek to understand the relationships between literary elements and how the author's style, tone, and background contribute to richness or lack thereof in the piece. The progression of our Native American things, connected to the short stories and poetry will help the student explain the elements of literature that prompt a personal response. It is that personal response, the ability to recognize, and recreate these literary devices that will determine the unit's success.

Enduring Understandings

Enduring Understandings are the big ideas of the unit taken directly from the Duval County Public Schools English I Curriculum. This unit was created with these understandings in mind to reach the objectives in the culminating writing event.

- Reading influences life; it is an interactive and individual activity between reader and text.
- Vocabulary affects comprehension.
- Fluency affects comprehension.
- Writing is a process that influences life.
- Listeners recognize the viewpoints of others.
- Literature provokes a response.
- Literary works reflect the culture that shaped them.

Essential Questions

The Essential Questions, again taken directly from the DCPS English I Curriculum, are designed to help the student uncover and internalize the Enduring Understandings. These questions will surface repeatedly in this unit's classroom activities. I believe these understandings and questions are the crucial foundation of a unit. If we can get the student to embrace them through innovative units and content, the student will not only increase a standardize test score but may very well become a life-long learner. Instilling the love of learning for the unmotivated student must happen first before test scores will budge.

- How does the reader interact with the short story?
- How does knowledge of literary elements promote comprehension and retention?
- How does the reader evaluate the effective use of literary elements?
- What varying techniques and strategies might a reader choose to utilize while engaged in reading short stories?
- How does an effective writer use the writing process to produce or respond to a short story?
- What is the importance of examining recurring themes across texts?
- What is the relationship between the author of a piece of literature and his/her personal experiences?
- How does intensive study of a genre or author deepen one's understanding of and appreciation for that particular genre or author?

Lesson 1: What Things Do I Have?

Standards

The Sunshine State Standards that will begin this lesson are LA.E.1.4.1, LA.E.1.4.3, and LA.E.1.4.5. See the Appendix for the complete listing and description.

Materials

- Construction paper, several sheets in 5 different colors.
- Letter to parent/guardian.
- Large index cards.
- Glue sticks.

Procedures

Using guided questioning and the things already in the classroom, involve the students in categorizing the things around them and on them. Guide to end up with a category of tools/utilitarian and the four Townsend categories discussed at length in the Rationale of this unit. Focus on what it is specifically about the thing that makes it one category or another. Assign each category a color and post it prominently in the classroom. Distribute the letter to the parent/guardian asking for their participation and the 2 large index cards each. Parent/guardian and student will choose an item from their home, either draw it or glue a picture of it on one card and on the lined side of the other card, describe it. What is it? Describe it as if we could not see it. Into which category does it belong? Why?

Close

Students (and the parent/guardian if they wish) will present the item to the class, mount their cards on the appropriate colored construction paper and place on the wall in the proper category. During this close, the teacher will be able to introduce simple literary elements in the student's description of their item. In addition, the teacher will examine with the students how they wrote supporting detail. The teacher will introduce the rubric for short and extended response including focus, organization, supporting detail, and conventions.

Assessment

Based on the rubric, students will peer grade the item descriptions for supporting detail only.

Lesson 2: Look at the Art and Tell the Story

Standards

In addition to the standards addressed in Lesson 1 and LA.D.2.4.5, LA.A. 2.4.1, and LA.A.2.4.2, this lesson will cross disciplines into the Visual Arts standards VA.B.1.4.2, VA.B.1.4.3, VA.B.1.4.4, VA.D.1.4.1, VA.D.1.4.2, VA.D.1.4.3, VA.C.1.4.1, VA.C.1.4.2.

Materials

- LCD projector and screen
- Emanuel Leutze's *Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way* 1861
- John Gast's *Amerian Progress* 1872
- Robert Lindeneux's *Trail of Tears* 1942
- Outline and number characters in painting.
- Flip chart and markers

Procedures

The teacher will help the students analyze the painting using four basic art concepts; color, setting, sense of movement, and balance. In the course of that discussion, the theme of the painting will emerge as well as the

painter's point of view and purpose. The students will then create a script of dialogue for the characters in the painting. The teacher will ask the students one by one who they think their character is and what might they be thinking or saying at this particular moment. As the teacher writes the script on the flip chart, the students will write it on their own paper. Then, the students will physically assume the positions of each of the characters in the painting then read the script. This may take more than one day because it will be important to do this exercise with two paintings one of which must be the "Trail of Tears."

Close

The teacher will connect the previous writing about things to the supporting detail expressed after viewing the painting. The closing will introduce artist's point of view, purpose, and the culture surrounding both.

Assessment

This is an informal assessment based the student's ability to match dialogue with the evidence of events in the painting.

Lesson 3: The Ancient Things

Standards

In addition to the standards in the previous lessons LA.C.1.4.1, LA.C.1.4.3, LA.A.2.4.3, LA.A.2.4.7, and LA.A.2.4.8 are added to the unit at this point.

Materials

- LCD projector and screen.
- Internet access and quality speakers.
- Slides from a variety of sources (see Teacher Resources for suggestions).
- Printed photos of ancient artifacts laminated.
- Construction paper in the same 5 colors as the thing-categories developed at the beginning.
- "Wasn't that a party? No, a glitzy funeral." By Desiree Cooper, Detroit Free Press

Procedures

Part I of this lesson will be a slide show and discussion of some of these ancient artifacts. The class will practice with the teacher analyzing the artifacts, making inferences and drawing conclusions about what they are and for what they were used. Most of these artifacts will have to do with death, burial ceremonies and beliefs and status within the ancient community. Then the students will each or in a small group receive a laminated photo to determine what it is. Students will describe the artifact; categorize it and using supporting detail write a paragraph about how it was used and what it meant. These will be discussed as a class and upon consensus, placed on the wall in the proper category of thing.

Part II of this lesson involves a commentary written by a columnist for the Detroit Free Press which also aired on National Public Radio (see Teacher Resources for the link to obtain a copy and hear the story on NPR). After reading the article, either as a class or individually, students will discuss the content in a Socratic circle. Questions to focus on are reliability, similarities to the ancient artifacts viewed and personal opinion regarding these current-day funerals.

Next, the students will listen to the reporter's commentary on her story through National Public Radio. Here we will discuss and identify the author's point of view, and discuss the student's opinions after reading and listening to determine how the spoken word and written word may produce different perceptions on behalf of the reader/listener.

Close

What have the students done so far? First, they have used evidence from pictures to make a statement or an opinion with valid supporting detail. They have described things that are either personal to them using basic literary devices such as simile. They have discovered metaphor through the ancient artifacts and have connected those metaphors to their own things. They have moved into listening and reading non-fiction for comparisons, point of view, opinion, and audience. Next, we will take these things and read a story.

Assessment

Two formal assessments will be counted here; first the individual or group description of the artifact utilizing the short and extended response rubric including focus, organization, supporting detail, and conventions. The second assessment will ask the student to write their opinion of the gang funerals in Detroit using supporting detail from the text, the commentary, and any connection to their own lives.

Lesson 4: "Because My Father Always Said He was the only Indian who saw Jimi Hendrix Play 'The Star Spangled Banner' at Woodstock"

Standards

In addition to the standards in all previous lessons, LA.A.1.4.1, LA.A.1.4.2, LA.A.1.4.4, LA.D.2.4.2, LA.E.1.4.1, LA.E.1.4.3, LA.E.1.4.5, LA.E.2.4.1, LA.E.2.4.2, and LA.E.2.4.6 are included to begin the reading process.

Materials

- *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* by Sherman Alexie.
- *Hair* VHS or DVD.
- "American Indian History or Non-Indian Perceptions of American Indian History?" article by Angela Wilson, *American Indian Quarterly*
- High resolution images of Woodstock in slide form.
- John Lee Hooker, Robert Johnson, and Jimi Hendrix music.
- LCD projector and screen.
- CD player with quality speakers.
- Graphic organizers for pre-reading, reading, and post-reading strategies.
- Graphic organizers for identifying literary devices.

Procedures

Part I on Lesson 5 discusses current thoughts and opinions of the American Indian. Once again utilizing the Socratic circle, students will read the Wilson article and discuss the author's point of view, cultural background, our own beliefs, stereotypes, and possible misconceptions.

Part II will introduce the students to the '60's and Woodstock. The teacher will show just the opening scene from *Hair* to introduce the styles of the '60's. It is important for the students to make the connection between

the hair and dress of the '60's with our beliefs of what it means to be an American Indian. The teacher will show a slide show of Woodstock images with music from the concert including, Jimi Hendrix.

Part III will be the reading of "*Because my father always said he was the only Indian to see Jimi Hendrix play the 'Star Spangled Banner' at Woodstock.*" Up to this point, our literary devices have been rather basic. It is through this short story that students will be introduced to Irony. With the help of graphic organizers, we will identify irony and the students will be able to do so with the background they now have on not only the brief overview of Woodstock, but the culture of American Indians that we know from the things they left behind.

Close

Gather all the literary devices identified thus far and put them in a "tool box" for the students to keep in their notebook to refer to at any time.

Assessment

Explain irony. What purpose does this device serve? How does it work for Sherman Alexie? Is it effective? Can you find an example of irony in another written work?

Lesson 5: "This is what it Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona"

Standards

The standards in this lesson are identical to those in Lesson 4.

Materials

- *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* by Sherman Alexie.

Procedures

Read for the sheer pleasure of reading and the students will identify literary devices as we go along. Focus on the manner in which Victor's father's remains were handled. Compare that to the funerals in Detroit and to the burial grounds of the Moundbuilders.

Close

How do an author's culture, background, and experience influence his/her writing? What similarities are there between Alexie's stories and our own lives? Can you think of a metaphor for Victor and for Thomas?

Assessment

Draw a picture, use magazine clippings, or anything else you like to create a metaphorical picture of Victor and Thomas based on how Alexie describes them. What animal might they be? A shell? An earthly element? What would they be like if they were female? In one paragraph describe the metaphor using supporting detail from the text.

Lesson 6: Field Trip to Ft. George Island/Huguenot Park

Procedures

Field trip procedures vary from district to district. However, the purpose is for the students to get hands on connection with American Indians and in our case that opportunity is very close by. Many of the ancient things we looked at were made from shells, beads, and other items in our own area. We will collect things for them to make a thing that symbolizes them so that we can create a story around it.

Lesson 7: Smoke Signals

Standards

In addition to all of the standards in the previous lessons LA.E.1.4.4 is added for drama as well as TH.C.1.4.1 and TH.E.1.4.3.

Materials

- *Why We Play Basketball* a poem by Sherman Alexie
- *Forgiving our Fathers* a poem by Dick Lourie
- *Smoke Signals* VHS or DVD
- Soundtrack CD *Smoke Signals*
- LCD projector and screen with quality sound.
- Active viewing guide.

Procedures

First, the students will apply their knowledge of literary devices to two poems, *Why We Play Basketball* by Sherman Alexie and *Forgiving our Fathers* by Dick Lourie. Students will read and analyze the meaning of the poetry, the use of literary devices, what devices are used, and if those devices are effective.

Second, the students will use an Active viewing guide customized to the literary devices and elements of plot and character that have been introduced through the short story readings while viewing the film *Smoke Signals*. While I think it is best at this point to interrupt the viewing as little as possible, some pauses may be necessary to ensure that all students are grasping the concepts and connections.

Close

Review the things owned by Arnold and Victor Joseph and Thomas Builds-the-fire. Why do you think the basketball played such prominent role in the film? What stereotypes do you see perpetuated? What stereotypes are destroyed? How are the characters different and similar to the characters in the short stories? Review the metaphor you created for Victor and Thomas. Would you change that metaphor now? Which character portrayal do you prefer? Does Thomas have special powers? How did the music in the film contribute to the characters?

Assessment

Students will complete the active viewing guide.

Lesson 8: Make Your Thing and Write Your Story

Standards

In addition to all of the previous lesson's standards LA.B.1.4.1, LA.B.1.4.2, LA.B.1.4.3, LA.B.2.4.2, and LA.B.2.4.3 are included to complete this unit.

Materials

- All the materials students collected on their field trip.
- Glue, markers, glitter, assorted foils.
- Lined, non-spiral, notebook paper.
- Blue or Black ink pen and a pencil.

Procedures

In part I of this lesson, students will create their thing. The only rule is that it must be made from things collected on our field trip and/or things found in nature. The student will give it a meaning, a use, and ultimately a story.

Part II will begin the writing process. The students will write their own story around the thing they created. We will begin with pre-writing strategies such as brainstorming, word webs, and outlines. Students will then begin their first draft which will be edited then revised. Students may revise as many times as necessary within the time frame. It is the goal for each student to complete a full narrative essay using literary devices, correct conventions, with organization and focus.

Culminating Event and Assessment

The students' creations and final narrative will be displayed in the classroom for parents/guardians, family, and friends to come in and view. The evening will be styled as a museum exhibit.

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