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Finding One's Voice

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Our voices are determined largely outside of our selves, according to where we live and work, what we read, and with whom we interact. ¹

Overview

The sound of children's voices echoing through the halls or creating a cacophony on the playground is commonplace in today's public schools. The more difficult place to hear voices is in our students' writing. As a sixth grade teacher I have often neglected teaching this critical trait of writing that brings life to students' stories; instead I find myself obsessing over the mechanics and conventions of a student's written work. Many of my students are second language learners and they struggle with writing. For most of my students, Spanish is their home language. It was not until I began discussing the meaning of voice in my seminar with Professor Langdon Hammer in the American Voices seminar that I began to understand the important role voice plays in written expression. To use a southern metaphor, voice is like the roux that holds the gumbo together; without it you have unseasoned bits sitting in a pot together with no flavor just like Huck Finn's complaint about the widow's cooking, "That is, nothing only everything was cooked by itself. In a barrel of odds and ends it is different; things get mixed up, and the juice kind of swaps around and the things go better." ² We need to teach our students how to make "things go better" and emphasize the importance of flavor.

What is the origin of our voice? "Our voices are determined largely outside of our selves, according to where we live and work, what we read, and with whom we interact," explains Toby Fulwiler in *Landmark Essays on Voice and Writing*. ³ Voice is created in communities and through social relationships and interactions. The students in my class are predominantly Hispanic; many are bilingual or second language learners. Their heritages are based in New Mexican and Mexican-American traditions. The common links between the two cultures are language, religion, and food. Both groups are predominantly Catholic and speak Spanish or a variation of it, and the crops of the Aztecs and Mayans migrated into New Mexico, where corn, beans, and chile peppers are the primary ingredients in New Mexican cooking. However, regardless of the commonalities within these cultures, there is tension between the two groups. I hope that this unit can help begin to dissolve that tension and celebrate the commonalities shared by the groups. The themes of home, food, family and cultural identity are the focus of the readings I have selected, because my students relate to these themes and sharing them through literature will help illustrate how ethnic and cultural heritage helps create one's

voice. Throughout the unit I want the students to explore their relationships to school, home, and community in conjunction with the literature we will be reading. What are the similarities between the students' cultures and the ones they are reading about? What are the differences? Why are the themes of home, food, and cultural identity important to the authors?

This curriculum unit is designed to help my sixth grade students develop a sense of pride in their varied Hispanic heritages by introducing them to African-American and Latino Culture. It is through introduction to the authors writing from within these cultures that I will teach them the importance of voice in reading and writing. The unit will focus on the relationship between images and words. We will begin with picture books illustrating voice through image, transition to poetry and how it creates imagery, and circle back to images developed alongside a personal narrative which will be written and illustrated by the students in picture book form. Students will first be exposed to picture books and poetry that are written from African-American and Latino perspectives. Since my students have limited knowledge and exposure to African-American culture, this unit will provide an excellent opportunity to discuss social issues that impact both Hispanic and African-American Culture —cultures that have often been underrepresented in the mainstream culture. I want my students to realize that by developing their voices they will have the opportunity to represent their cultures and shift this paradigm of under- representation. I want to illustrate the struggles that African-Americans and Latinos have endured in order to ensure their voices are heard in this country. I hope the students will be able to connect to the voices that sing out about freedom and oppression.

Voice amplifies not only the voice speaking, but the body that houses it. In this country children are often viewed as beings that should be seen and not heard. Children today, especially adolescents, feel a strong desire to have their voices heard, and I want to empower my students to find their voices and articulate them. My objective for this unit is to connect my students to themes that will resonate with them, themes that are close to their hearts and minds. I want the students to realize that they are not invisible, as they may feel or perceive themselves to be. I want them to experience being heard and seen and developing their own voices in oral and written expression is one way to accomplish that. I want the students to make personal connections to the poetry and literature that we read, and to reveal these connections in their written expression. Finally, I hope by exposing the students to the beautiful voices expressed in the poetry and literature of African-American and Latino culture, they will begin to embrace, value, and exhibit pride in their own cultures.

Rationale

In my sixth grade language arts curriculum I am required to teach students how to speak and write for expression. One strategy that my elementary school has adopted is *6 Traits of Writing*, an approach which was developed by the North West Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL). The traits of writing are: ideas, organization, voice, word choice, sentence fluency, and conventions. ⁴ According to the NWREL writing rubric for achieving a high score for voice, the student's writing speaks directly to the reader in a way that is individual, compelling, and engaging. The writer crafts the writing with awareness and respect for the audience and the purpose for writing. ⁵ One of my rationales for teaching voice is motivated by the requirement of the New Mexico State Standards and my school's curriculum and expectations.

My students' weakest writing trait is voice. My sixth grade students are not shy, but when they converse their

words often lack substance and they struggle to articulate an argument or express their true feelings. All too often the classroom is controlled by one or two students who have strong or rather loud voices. These students may appear to be more confident than other students who do not vocalize their thoughts and opinions, but at the same time the vocal students use their voices to manipulate and control others. The students who are vocal are not necessarily the best writers in the class, and transcribing spoken voice into narrative is not their strength. The talkative student is the one who has difficulty getting her thoughts down on paper, and when she does she often writes colorless stories that deviate from the plot and send the reader on a search for a conclusion or resolution. The characters developed are often one-dimensional. I want to expose this student to writers who inspire in hopes that she will be motivated to develop her own unique voice and incorporate her own experiences in her written expressions.

I am also drawn to teaching voice because it is a powerful tool, not just as a literary device, but for personal reflection and empowerment. I believe discovering one's voice is the key to empowerment and I want to convey this to my students — all of whom come from impoverished households. Many of my students recognize that they live in poverty and want to have a better life for themselves. The average sixth grade student is on the cusp of adolescence and although he may be a conformist, friends around him are starting to embrace their individuality and are looking for opportunities and avenues of personal expression. Helping the student find his voice will be challenging and most likely it will be an ongoing task, but if I can begin to help one student discover the tools to express and articulate his needs and desires, he will be one step closer to actualizing his dreams. I also want my students to realize that there are many ways to convey voice. I want to expose them to colorful and noisy poetry, rich literature that contains voices to enrich their lives and perhaps even blow their minds.

We teach voice so that the student will have the tools to make writing three-dimensional. Without voice the student's writing is flat like a soda pop that has lost its fizz. Voice helps make meaning in writing. In order for students to understand voice they need to be able to hear tone. How something is said greatly affects its meaning. When a student apologizes to another student or even to me, she often uses a tone that implies a certain attitude, conveying she is not truly sorry for her actions. This example will lend itself to a class discussion about using voice in writing to convey meaning. The tone or timbre that is identified in one's writing can often alert us to the presence of the author and this in turn allows us to *hear* the person behind the sentences. ⁶ My task in this unit will be to read aloud a variety of stories that are examples of voice. I will describe the children's picture books I plan on using under the section called "strategies." By using picture and storybooks I hope to convey the voices of different characters.

I hope that when the student incorporates voice in his writing the end result will be a clear representation of his personality. Robert Frost said, "The ear is the only true writer and the only true reader." ⁷ Frost is trying to convey that good writing can only be enjoyed and totally embraced by the reader when voice is present, thus allowing the sound of the writer's voice to resonate off the page. If we write with intention to create, develop, and nurture our voice, as if our own ear is our first audience, then we will be more successful in reaching our audience. We are dependent on our ears to hear the voice coming off the page because when we depend solely on the eyes to read we see only a small fraction of what is really there. Our eyes see letters that combine to form words and sentences, at times distancing us from the internal vision of the writer. Peter Elbow differentiates between voice and writing on a literal level and describes voice, "Voice involves sound, hearing and time; writing or text involves sight and space." ⁸ My goal for my students throughout this unit is to move from the definition of voice as purely sound to beginning to "hear" their own voices and develop them in writing— to create meaning and a sense of self.

Objectives

This curriculum unit will provide me the opportunity to model voice for my students through reading children's picture books, poetry, and literature. The challenge I face in this unit is taking an abstract concept like voice and making it tangible for my students. To address this issue I plan to introduce the concept by using concrete examples of voice as heard and seen through picture books and progress slowly toward the more abstract expressions of voice including symbolic imagery and metaphor. This unit will teach voice through three different genres: picture books, poetry, and novels. The unit will take about three weeks to complete. Reading books and poetry that emphasize first person point of view will assist my students in making personal connections to the author's voice. In my classroom I refer to this connection as text-to-self — the student is able to dip into his or her own background knowledge and make a direct link with the text. At the end of this unit on voice the students will have a portfolio containing poetry, personal narrative, letters, and artistic expressions demonstrating their understanding of voice in self-expression. The student's final project will be the authoring and illustration of a picture book containing a personal narrative.

My primary objective for this unit is to enable my sixth grade students to demonstrate voice through their writing. Since I believe that reading and writing are totally interconnected, my goal will be to expose my students to written works that contain a lot of figurative language. Understanding figurative language will help the student to comprehend text and observe the author's use of it to develop voice in his or her writing.

The first standard for New Mexico Sixth Grade Language Arts is reading and listening for comprehension.⁹ Simply translated, this standard expects that students will apply a variety of strategies and skills to comprehend information that is read, heard, and viewed. The Benchmark for this standard is to listen to, read, react to, and interpret information. I define information for this unit as poetry and literature. Exploring expressive materials that are read, heard, or viewed is a performance objective along with identifying figurative language in an oral selection. My curriculum unit will focus on these two performance objectives and culminate in the student writing a personal narrative in the form of a picture book. Usually the writing of a personal narrative is one of the first assignments sixth graders receive. However, I do not intend to give this assignment until the end of the unit. Students will be given many different activities to help practice using voice in their writing; it will not be until the end of the unit that I will have the expectation that students will be able to synthesize all that they have learned in order to develop a strong narrative illustrating mastery of voice in their own writing.

The second standard focuses on writing and speaking for expression, which essentially is saying that students will communicate effectively through speaking and writing. The benchmark I will focus on for this standard is the one that asks students to demonstrate competence in the skills and strategies of the writing process. As I mentioned in my rationale, the writing process is taught by using the *6 Traits of Writing* assessment rubric. My goal is to teach all traits of writing throughout the year, but for the purpose of this curriculum unit I will focus more attention on voice; other traits will be taught in mini-lessons. The performance objective for written expression expects students to be able to compose a variety of writings that express individual perspectives drawn from personal experience through the writing process (drafting, revising, editing, and proofreading their own written work), using direct feedback from peers or peer editing, and writing for public and private audiences. The primary performance objective of producing writings that incorporate a definite voice (appropriate to the writing purpose) will be interspersed throughout the curriculum unit.

Strategies

How will I meet the standards and performance objectives? One of the most successful approaches to teaching literacy is the implementation of a balanced literacy framework, whereby the teacher begins with a whole group lesson, small group collaboration, and independent practice incorporating writing and reading practice simultaneously throughout the lesson. The lesson begins with the teacher modeling how to use both reading and writing strategies to the whole class. This strategy is often termed "whole group instruction." Next, students participate in "small group practice." Finally, students are set free to practice the skill in "independent practice." The goal of this approach is to model good reading strategies as well as good writing habits.

I have a ninety minute period in which to implement balanced literacy and I divide the time into three mini-blocks which allow time for whole class/direct instruction, small group cooperative learning, and independent practice along with one-on-one teacher -student mentoring. It is important to me to provide readings that stress the purpose and joy of reading, especially for those students who are struggling readers.

Voice can be an abstract concept to teach. It is critical that teachers model voice by reading very rich descriptive poetry and literature to their students. I will structure this unit by using picture books for read aloud, poetry books for small group instruction in which three to four students will form a group and analyze voice in poems, and the unit will culminate with the reading of age appropriate novels written in first person that the students will be exposed to through read aloud, literature circles, and independent reading.

Why read aloud to students? Reading aloud to students provides the opportunity for students to hear the tone of the piece of writing. For those students who have limited oral language, the reading aloud activities model language and help to guide and direct them when they engage in independent practice later in the lesson. This reading strategy also helps draw the student's attention to the variety of voices that may exist in one piece of writing by placing the focus of the book on a listening activity rather than on a reading one. The student can hear the voices through careful listening as the teacher's inflection or dialect changes throughout the reading. By providing a variety of opportunities for the student to participate in listening activities, I hope the student will come to the realization that the text on the page is more than just letters and words; I want him to realize that the words have life and vitality. Allowing the student to practice reading aloud is just as important as the teacher modeling it for him. Providing multiple opportunities for students to hear stories and read stories aloud will help them not only identify voice, but develop comprehension and critical thinking skills. Sharing what I am thinking about as I read a story is another form of modeling good reading strategies for the student. The student in turn can practice this same tactic when he reads aloud in small groups. Reading aloud also lends itself to great opportunities to discuss the actions and decisions of characters in stories as they encounter life's problems. ¹⁰

Many teachers think that the older students get the less they need to be read to, but this is counter-productive to helping students learn in their zone of proximal development. The zone of proximal development (ZPD) is a concept developed by the Russian psychologist and social constructivist Lev Vygotsky.

¹¹ The ZPD is defined as

The distance between the actual developmental level as determined by Independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under

adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers. ¹²

Literacy coaches and teachers know that for a student to make gains in reading, the student must be reading "in the zone" in order not to get frustrated and give up on the text while reading. There are several assessments that allow a teacher to determine a student's ZPD. The one that I am most familiar with is the STAR Reading Software developed by Renaissance Learning. ¹³ Reading aloud provides the teacher with excellent opportunities to model reading strategies such as prediction, questioning, clarification, as well as pronunciation of vocabulary for the students. By combining the two reading strategies, reading aloud and independent reading, the teacher is providing a balanced literacy program that will nurture the development of good reading habits in students.

The books I will use for reading aloud will serve many purposes. The book will illustrate voice, descriptive language, metaphor and figurative language, and provide an interesting theme pertinent to the student's social development. I like to use the Caldecott Medal winners because the design and artistic elements hold students' attention and for many students it is the pictures that provide the clues for his comprehension.

Introducing Voice through Picture Books

I will begin the unit by defining voice through identification. In order for the student to understand what voice is, he must first be able to identify it. It is important for the student to identify and distinguish authors' voices, so that when he is asked to express his own or create his own he will have many models from which to draw. Examining the author's voice in model texts is one of the best techniques to use with students. ¹⁴ We will conduct this examination as a large group. I will ask a question and model my personal thought process to the students as I try and answer the question.

The first book I will use in this unit will be Eve Bunting's *Smoky Night*, illustrated by David Diaz. The story is told in the first person by a boy living in a big city and witnessing rioting in his neighborhood. In the middle of the night he and his family have to evacuate and move to a shelter. The themes of family, community, and ethnic and cultural identity are evident throughout the story. The main character and his family exhibit compassion and acceptance in the face of adversity. The first page begins

Mama and I stand well back from our window, looking down. I'm holding Jasmine, my cat. We don't have our lights on though it's almost dark. People are rioting in the street below. ¹⁵

After reading this page I will ask the students several questions: Who is the speaker? Can you describe him? What words in the passage help you identify the speaker? Once the class has discussed these questions in the large group setting, I will continue reading. After each page I will repeat the three questions. When we have finished the book, I will ask the students to think about all the voices that are portrayed in the book. The students will generate a voice chart (see example below) and then we will re-visit the story to look for important words and phrases that helped us identify each voice that appeared in the story. As the students identify the words, I will write it on the chart. This activity is a mini-lesson on parts of speech and although students will be likely to pull words from the text that do not help identify voice it will still help identify parts of speech. The identification of the voice may come at the end of the chart rather than the beginning. I will allow students to experiment with naming the voice before and after we fill in the chart. The words italicized will be

the ones to focus on for voice identification. This chart will remain on the wall to use as a reference later when we compare voices from another book by Eve Bunting.

Voice Chart Example

Voice's Description or Name	Nouns	Verbs	Adjectives	Adverbs	Pronouns	Phrases
? (young boy or girl)	<i>Mama</i> window <i>Jasmine</i> <i>cat</i> lights	stand looking holding <i>rioting</i>	dark	well back	<i>We</i> <i>I</i>	<i>People</i> <i>are</i> <i>rioting</i>

Going Home is also by Eve Bunting and illustrated by David Diaz. This story is about Carlos and his family's journey to their home in Mexico. Carlos isn't too excited about the idea, but upon arrival to the Mexican town of La Perla, Carlos is swept into the local festivities by Grandfather, Aunt Ana, and the whole village. This story's theme is also one about the importance of family, community and ethnic and cultural identity, as well as compassion and acceptance; in this case, Carlos learns to understand place and his role in it. This book will resonate with my students, since many of them were born in Mexico, but have grown up in the States and have not spent a lot of time there. The read aloud will be conducted in the same manner as with *Smoky Night* and the same three questions will be asked. At the end of the story the class will generate another chart listing various voices and key words and phrases. The culminating activity will be to compare and contrast the authors' voices in these two books. Using a Venn diagram pocket chart ¹⁶ students will transfer the information from our charts into the pocket chart to determine similarities and differences among the voices in each story.

The next author I will focus on will be Faith Ringgold. Her protagonists are often young girls, and her books will provide a nice contrast to the boy characters of Eve Bunting's books. I will begin this part of the unit by using *Tar Beach*. Like Bunting's stories, the themes focus on the importance of family, community and ethnic and cultural identity. *Tar Beach* refers to the rooftop of main character's apartment building, where meals are shared with neighbors and her community gathers to socialize. This is the story of a girl, Cassie Louise Lightfoot, who flies over the new labor union building her father is helping to construct. Cassie's father is excluded from "the Union" because of his race; he is biracial—half African-American and half Native American. Unlike *Smoky Night* and *Going Home*, Ringgold's books tend to use more metaphors and allegory. Ringgold is concerned with the experience of the Black female in America, and she empowers her protagonists with fantastical gifts. In the case of *Tar Beach*, Cassie has the ability to fly and claim ownership over the things she flies above. She has the freedom that her forefathers did not. The richness of this story and the metaphors and issues contained within the book will bring about interesting discussions for the students. The same questions will be presented at the start of the read aloud. However, instead of repeating the questions after every page, I will ask the students to inform me when another voice is introduced in the story. I will focus the student's attention on the page that says

Well, Daddy is going to own that building, 'cause I'm gonna fly over it and give it to him. Then it won't matter that he's not in their old union, or whether he's colored or a half-breed Indian, like they say. ¹⁷

Here we see that the author has the protagonist refer to someone else's voice in the last sentence, "like they

say." I will ask the students who the "they" are in this passage and what role they play. We will then discuss the issue of belonging to a group.

At this point in the lesson I will divide the students into small groups of three to four students and provide each group with the following questions, which can be found inside the front cover of the paperback edition of *Tar Beach*: Have you ever wanted to be a part of a group that wouldn't let you join? Do you know why they wouldn't let you? How did you feel? Have you ever been part of a group or a club that wouldn't let other people join? Did you like being part of the group? Why or why not? Why didn't you include certain people? How do you think that made them feel? How did you feel? The students will be given ten minutes to discuss these questions and then report back to the group with a quick oral summary of their discussion. Next, I will finish reading the story, and together we will generate a voice chart as we did with Eve Bunting's books.

The book I will use to compare with *Tar Beach* is *Aunt Harriet's Underground Railroad in the Sky*, also by Faith Ringgold. This story continues the flying adventure of Cassie Louise Lightfoot. In this story, however, Cassie takes along her younger brother, BeBe, and they learn about their great-great-grandparents' long journey from slavery to freedom guided by the voice of Harriet Tubman. The themes of home and family take on a new meaning. The slaves are running away from the home they knew, but along the way it is the homes of strangers that provide comfort and security and in the end freedom. In this story Cassie's voice appears to have matured based on the vocabulary she is using to narrate this journey. In order to help build the student's vocabulary, we will use a strategy developed by Marcia Brechtel called a Cognitive Content Dictionary (CCD).

¹⁸ According to Brechtel, the CCD engages students in metacognition. It is a grid that asks students to predict the meaning of the chosen word.

Cognitive Content Dictionary Example

Word	Prediction	Definition	Use in a sentence
ramshackled			
conductor			
passenger			
bedraggled			
Slavery			
Underground Railroad			

The CCD will be filled out as a large group and this strategy will be used again when students read independently. They will identify new vocabulary in their novel and create their own CCD.

The voice that Cassie has adopted has changed from the one she used in *Tar Beach* and it reflects the time period in which her journey takes place. Cassie also uses more metaphor and figurative language throughout the story. I will draw attention to the metaphors she uses early on such as, "...oceans like tiny cups of tea." We will discuss the use of metaphor, and I will ask the students to try and listen for more figurative language as we continue reading the book. When Cassie says, "Then the woman conductor's voice came like a soft whisper in my ear...", I will ask for a student volunteer to read the voice of Harriet Tubman in a soft whisper. By this time in the lesson I have read four books aloud and the students have been listening carefully. This is the point where I let them practice using their voices to convey the voice of Harriet Tubman. We will discuss the

significance of Harriet Tubman's voice in this story. There will be many more voices that will appear throughout this story, and I will ask the students to write about one voice that resonates with them. They will write this reflection in their interactive journals, which is another strategy to help students practice written language developed by Marcia Brechtel.¹⁹ In an interactive journal, the student will write in letter format and address the letter to me. I will then read the letters and reply back with a letter. This activity allows the students to practice expressing their personal voices.

Recognizing Voice in Poetry

In this section of the curriculum unit I will be introducing poetry. Students will be exposed to metaphor, simile, symbolism, and point of view. Each student will learn that poetry is another form of spoken expression, and throughout the poetry lessons students will have the opportunity to listen to, read, recite, and write poetry. They will draw parallels between the themes addressed in selected poems and the themes addressed in the picture books we read in class. The class will start this part of the unit by conducting a word study. I will introduce the word "poetry" to the class. Students will brainstorm ideas that come to mind when they hear it. Together we will create a word web.

The poet I will introduce first will be Langston Hughes. Hughes is a celebrated African-American poet who had an incredible gift for incorporating a variety of voices into his poems. The themes of cultural and ethnic identity will continue to be illustrated to students through Hughes' poetry. His poetry celebrates the everyday life of African-Americans while at the same time acknowledging the struggles of his heritage. His poetry incorporates rhythms of jazz, blues, and spirituals. The first poem we will read will be "I, Too" by Langston Hughes. I will read the poem aloud and then call on several volunteers to take turns reading the poem aloud. I will write several questions on the board and ask the students to answer two of them in their interactive journals. Who is speaking? In the first line, "I, too, sing America," who else is singing America? What is positive about the voice's future? Who will be ashamed?

Voice Expression Activity I: Writing from Another Point of View

In this activity, the student will write from someone else's perspective in the first person. This activity will ask the students to make connections within their own communities and ask them to think about the people in their communities and their connections to home. I will begin the activity by giving each student a "Homie," one of a collection of small plastic figurines depicting various characters within Hispanic/Latino urban life. These are regional toy figures that can be purchased from gumball machines in grocery stores and restaurants. Many of my students collect Homies as well as wear t-shirts with the "Homies" logo; they even have folders to keep their papers in that have pictures of the Homies. For this assignment, students will be asked to write a brief personal narrative from the perspective of their Homies. Throughout the duration of this assignment I will keep a copy of the poem "I, Too" that is illustrated in the book *Poetry for Young People: Langston Hughes* in front of the classroom so that students may revisit the voice Hughes developed in that poem. Each student will respond to the following prompts in the first person and develop a voice for his or her

individual Homie. The student will be asked to develop a name, age, and family history in his introduction, and in the body of his narrative he will describe something the Homie is passionate about. For example, one of the Homies appears to be a young male rapper. He wears a hooded sweatshirt with a baseball cap, rather baggy pants and in his right hand he clutches a microphone. I will prompt the student into writing by asking who he is and what he has to say to us. The student will be asked to limit his writing to about a page; for most of my students this is about the right length for them to be able to develop a voice, while at the same time keeping their writing succinct and on topic.

This will be the students' first attempt to articulate someone else's voice. My objective is to use the students' final drafts as a springboard for the last assignment for this unit when they will write a personal narrative expressing their own voices. We will proofread and edit before writing a final draft which will be published and put on a bulletin board outside our room. Students who are willing to share will give an oral presentation of their final drafts. Finally, to close this activity I will ask the students to make drawings of their Homies, which will accompany their narratives on the bulletin board. This bulletin board will be the home to various examples of student voices throughout this unit.

Voice Expression Activity II: Using Multimedia to Elicit Voice

In this activity students will listen to Langston Hughes read "The Negro Speaks of Rivers." I will be using an audio clip in which Langston Hughes introduces his poem and discusses its background.²⁰ This background knowledge will help the student understand the poet's motivation for writing the poem. After the student listens to the poem, I will ask her a series of questions, and we will discuss the poem in detail. I will place a copy of the poem on an overhead transparency so that the student can reference the poem as we discuss it. What is the poem talking about? Whose is the voice that is speaking? What and where are the Euphrates, the Congo, the Nile, the Mississippi? Who was Abraham Lincoln and why was he mentioned in this poem? Upon completion of our discussion, students will be given a blank piece of paper and asked to copy down the poem. Once they have copied it down they will be asked to draw a picture that symbolizes the meaning of the poem for them.

The next activity will expand upon the theme of rivers introduced by Langston Hughes. New Mexico's earliest peoples, the Anasazi and the Pueblo, settled along the Rio Puerco and the Rio Grande, the source of life for these cultures. The Rio Grande continued to play an important role as the Spanish Conquistadors followed it up from Mexico and began distributing land grants along its banks as the Spanish Crown claimed and settled the region. Today, the Rio Grande continues to be the source of life for New Mexicans and experiences drought and other acts of nature that also negatively impact agriculture, housing, and commerce. In order for my students to understand the importance and precarious nature of living along a river, I will show them a video I took after Hurricane Katrina struck the gulf coast and the levees broke in New Orleans. The lesson will emphasize that among the connections that exist between students in New Orleans and students in New Mexico is that neither community would exist without the river that gives and can also take away life.

I will begin the lesson by giving a brief overview of the impact of Hurricane Katrina on New Orleans and its people in August of 2005. After this introduction I will show students the video made while I visited the 9th Ward six months after the levees broke. The homemade movie is accompanied by a song written by Nappy Roots. The purpose of showing this video is multi-faceted. First, the students at my school conducted a food

and clothing drive to send to the victims of Hurricane Katrina immediately following the evacuation because they saw the devastation on the news, but they had not had any personal ties to the place; the video can help facilitate that connection for them. Secondly, I'd like them to explore voices that are not spoken but rather seen and experienced through other senses. Images, whether they be artistic renderings or photographs, have tremendous power. They can help increase people's compassion and empathy while at the same time heightening their awareness of social injustice. Lastly, this video is an expression of my voice, and although I do not speak during the video it is my voice that is speaking to the students from behind the camera lens.

The video provides images, like the pictures books I read to the students at the beginning of the unit, and will help them create words to describe what they see and feel. After showing the video to my students once, I will then show it a second time and ask the students to think about the houses that are shown throughout the video and the voices of the people that lived in these houses. After the second viewing of the video, we will begin a writing activity to express voice through poetry. Each student will write a poem using voices that they heard coming from the houses seen in the video. What would these voices be saying before the levees broke? What were the voices saying when the levees broke? What are they saying now? In this activity, I will talk about free verse and help the students distinguish between rhyming poetry, which they are very familiar with and free verse. Students will be encouraged to use free verse. The poem will be organized in three stanzas. The first stanza will focus on the voice of the past, the second stanza the voice of the present, and the third stanza the voice of the future. The goal will be to have each student write a poem that articulates a voice coming from a house in the 9th Ward, tracing its history from past to future. These poems will be put up on our bulletin board alongside still photos I have of the homes of the 9th Ward.

Poetry Circles

Poetry circles will provide opportunities for my students to read poetry to one another and be exposed to more poets who express voice in interesting ways. The Poetry circle will be made of three to four students. Each group will be assigned a book of poems to read and discuss at their table. Students will take turns reading poems aloud. Each student must select three poems that he or she likes and copy them down to add to their voice portfolio. Each student must select one poem for recitation in front of the class and one poem to write about in their interactive journal. They may state what they like or do not like about the poem. They may discuss what imagery they discovered in the poem or the personal connections they feel to the poem. Once a student has completed his assignment he is free to move to another group and repeat the drill for the new book of poetry. The books that will be used for poetry circles are: *Bronx Masquerade*, *Locomotion*, *Ashley Bryan's ABC of African American Poetry*, and *Poetry for Young People: Langston Hughes*. The poetry circles will be conducted for thirty minutes each day for the duration of the unit.

Personal Narrative

Students will be required to write two different narratives at the culmination of this unit. The first narrative will be linked to a novel that each student will select and the other narrative will be picture book authored and illustrated by the student. This last project will bring this unit to a close and tie the unit together with a new emphasis on voice in picture books, this time using the voice of the students.

The narrative activity will begin by introducing students to novels that explore the first person point of view. These novels are fictionalized personal narratives yet sometimes we find that they are autobiographical. Through sharing excerpts from a variety of novels about adolescents, I hope to show my students ways in which to express their own voices. I will read excerpts from *Monster*, *The House on Mango Street*, *Esperanza Rising*, *The Circuit*, *Baseball in April*, *Walk Two Moons*, *Any Small Goodness*, *Boy*, *Voices from the Fields*, and *Breaking Through*. The common theme found in all of these novels is that they are coming-of-age novels, illustrating the struggles of growing up. This is a powerful theme for my students and the purpose of reading excerpts from each of these novels is to entice the students to read. Before I require the students to read one of the aforementioned books, I will read *Parrot in the Oven: Mi Vida* by Victor Martinez. This book is about a fourteen-year-old who is surrounded by the gang lifestyle. He doesn't receive any attention or acknowledgement from his father who is a drunk and his brother is constantly avoiding responsibility. He is confronted with tough decisions. The protagonist has a great voice.

Without work, I was empty as a Coke bottle. School was starting soon, and needed money for clothes and paper stuff. I wanted a baseball mitt so bad a sweet hurt blossomed in my stomach whenever I thought about it. ²¹

He is also bilingual like many of my students, and he casually integrates his mother tongue into the text at various times, in a subtle yet effective manner. This is a writing style that I will encourage my students to replicate.

One of the listeners, a tall pimple-faced guy with blotchy cheeks and the skin of a fig, only paler, shouted out, "Pinches gavachos don't give a damn about harassing us! Gavachos do what they want. ²²

The students will select a book for independent reading throughout the weeks, while I read *Parrot in the Oven* aloud. At the end of the reading period, which should take three weeks, students will be asked to write their own personal narratives. The assignment will be to step into the shoes of the protagonist and write an essay about what it would be like for you to walk into your main character's neighborhood. Each student will write in the first person about his or her experience in this new world. They will write a first draft, and then work with a peer to proofread and edit their stories. Next, they will have an individual conference with me and then submit a final draft. The goal is to project voice through a narrative that describes each student's experience in an unfamiliar setting.

The final project that will assess each student's understanding of voice will be a personal narrative in the form of a picture book. Students will be required to illustrate their picture books with photographs, drawings, memorabilia from childhood, or other artistic expressions. The narrative will be told in the first person and students will be asked to tell stories about their family, school, or heritage through images and words. Each student will share his or her book with the class and articulate his or her voice while being seen and heard in a

community of peers.

Voice is a portal to identity. I want my students to realize that they are not "invisibles." I want them to experience being heard and seen. By helping my students find their own voices, I hope to empower them to use them in ways that help strengthen their own sense of identity as well as their relationships to their own communities and cultures.

Resources

Annotated Bibliography

Brechtel, Marcia. *Bringing it all together: language and literacy in the multilingual classroom*. New Jersey: DominiePress-Pearson Learning Group, 2001.

This book is written by the woman who created Guided Language Acquisition Demonstration project. It has excellent examples of language strategies and how to apply them directly to the classroom.

Elbow, Peter, ed. *Landmark essays on voice and writing*. Mahwah, NJ: Hermagoras Press, 1994.

An excellent reference for learning more about voice in literature from the theorists and researchers in the field.

Frost, Robert. *Collected poems, prose, and plays*. New York: Library of America, 1995.

A wonderful collection of Frost's works from the well-known to more obscure letters.

Indrisano, Roselmina., and Jean Paratore. *Learning to write, writing to learn: theory and research in practice*. DE: International Reading Association, 2005.

These team of researchers has developed a theory for reading and writing based on the whole language theory that reading and writing should be integrated.

Twain, Mark. *The Adventures of huckleberry finn*. New York: Penguin Classics, 1985.

The classic American novel that brings out incredible voices throughout the work.

Vygotsky, L.S. *Mind and society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978.

One of the early psychologists to understand and research child development, Vygotsky discusses his theory in depth.

Teacher and Student Resources

Picture Books

Bunting, Eve. *Going home*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1998.

A beautiful story about a young boy name Carlos going to visit his relatives in Mexico during the holidays.

Bunting, Eve. *Smoky night*. New York: Voyageur-Harcourt, Inc.,1994.

A riot breaks out on the streets a young boy's apartment and he and his family learn about accepting cultural differences one smoky night.

Ringgold, Faith. *Aunt harriet's underground railroad in the sky*. New York: Crown Publishers, 1992.

A beautifully illustrated book telling the story of a young girl and her brother's adventure with Harriet Tubman along the Underground Railroad.

Ringgold, Faith. *Tar beach*. New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1991.

A young girl named Cassie dreams about finding freedom in flight and she soars over New York City and shares her dreams with her family on their rooftop, Tar Beach.

Shore, Diane Z. and Jessica Alexander. *This is the dream*. NewYork: Harper Collins Publishers, 2006.

A beautiful collage that illustrates the struggles of the Civil Rights Movement.

Wiesner, David. *Tuesday*. New York: Clarion Books, 1991.

This is a picture book with very little text. It depicts what happens in a lily pond at nine p.m. on a Tuesday night. Students will love the images and it is a great book to have students narrate.

Poetry

Bryan, Ashley. *Ashley bryan's ABC of african american poetry*. New York: Aladdin Picture Books, 1997.

A great way to introduce alphabet books while reading beautiful poems written by African Americans.

Roessel, David and Arnold Rampersad, ed. *Poetry for young people: langston hughes*. New York: Sterling Publishing, Co., Inc., 2006.

An exquisite collection of Hushes poems with illustrations that reflect the mood and tone of his poetry.

Novels

Atkin, S. Beth. *Voices from the field*. New York: Little, Brown Young Readers, 2000.

Interviews, poems, photographs from children of migrant farm workers in California.

Cisneros, Sandra. *The House on mango street*. New York: Vintage, 1991.

A story about a girl coming of age in the Hispanic quarter of Chicago, uses poems and stories to express thoughts and emotions about her oppressive environment.

Creech, Sharon. *Walk two moons*. New York: Harper Teen, 2003.

A Native-American teenager tells the tale of a friend and deals with her relationship with her own mother.

Dahl, Roald. *Tales of childhood*. New York: Puffin Books, 1984.

Roald Dahl is known for his humorous novels, in this book he writes about his childhood experiences.

Jimenez, Francisco. *Breaking through*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2002.

This is the sequel to Jimenez's book *The Circuit*.

Jimenez, Francisco. *The Circuit*. Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press,

1997.

This is a collection of short stories based on the life of the author, Francisco Jimenez, while he was growing up as the son of migrant farm workers in California

Johnston, Tony. *Any small goodness*. New York: Scholastic Paperbacks, 2003.

A story about a Mexican family arriving in L.A. and the struggles they encounter being immigrants. A mix of Spanish and English is used by the 11 year old narrator throughout the book.

Lester, Julius. *Days of tears: a novel in dialogue*. New York: Hyperion Paperbacks for

Children, 2005.

A novel about a slave auction, an excellent selection for reader's theater.

Lowry, Louis. *Number the stars*. New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishers, 1989.

A story about a ten-year-old girl and her best friend and how they deal with the Nazi invasion of Denmark in 1943.

Martinez, Victor. *Parrot in the oven: mi vida*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers, Inc.,

1996.

A novel about a young Hispanic male growing up in a challenging household and a gang-infested neighborhood. Written in first person with beautiful examples of figurative language woven throughout the book.

Myers, Walter Dean. *Monster*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1999.

An intense story about an African American teenager accused of a crime. The story is told in the first person through his journal writing and his screenplay. This book is intended for mature readers.

Ryan, Pam Munoz. *Esperanza rising*. New York: Blue Sky Press, 2002.

A story of a young girl making the transition with her family from living in Mexico to working as migrant farm workers in the United States.

Soto, Gary. *Baseball in april and other stories*. New York: Harcourt Paperback, 2000.

The only book that is not a novel, but rather a collection of short stories. Full of rich language and imagery.

Notes

1. Elbow, Peter, ed. *Landmark essays on voice and writing*. (Mahwah, NJ: Hermagoras Press, 1994): 157.
2. Twain, Mark. *The Adventures of huckleberry finn* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1985): 10.
3. Elbow, Peter, ed. *Landmark essays on voice and writing*. (Mahwah, NJ: Hermagoras Press, 1994): 157.
4. Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory. <http://www.nwrel.org/index.php> (accessed July 9, 2008)
5. Northwest Regional Educational. "6+1 Traits of Writing." <http://www.nwrel.org/assessment/pdfRubrics/6plus1traits.PDF> (accessed July 9, 2008)
6. Elbow, Peter, ed. *Landmark essays on voice and writing*. (Mahwah, NJ: Hermagoras Press, 1994): 157.
7. Frost, Robert. *Collected poems, prose, and plays* (New York : Library of America, 1995): 677.
8. Elbow, Peter, ed. *Landmark essays on voice and writing*. (Mahwah, NJ: Hermagoras Press, 1994): xxii.
9. New Mexico Public Education Department. "New Mexico Curriculum Framework for Language Arts." (2000). <http://www.ped.state.nm.us/nmStandards.html> (accessed July 15, 2008).
10. Polacco, Patricia. "Read Aloud Tips." <http://www.uiowa.edu/~humiowa/chickensunday4.html> (accessed July 11, 2008).
11. Vygotsky, L.S. *Mind and society: The development of higher psychological processes*.(Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978): 86.
12. Ibid, p. 86
13. Renaissance Learning. <http://www.renlearn.com> (accessed on July 12, 2008).
14. Indrisano, Roselmina., and Jean Paratore. *Learning to write, writing to learn: theory and research in practice*. (DE: International Reading Association, 2005)
15. Bunting, Eve, and David Diaz. *Smoky night*. (New York:Voyager Books-Harcourt, Inc., 1994)
16. A Venn diagram pocket chart is an organizer to help students compare and contrast things. It has slots for words to be placed or sentence strips. It is a nice visual for kids and words and sentences can easily be moved and rearranged. They can be ordered

through a company called School Specialty.

17. Ringgold, Faith. *Tar beach*. (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1991).

18. Brechtel, Marcia *Bringing it all together: language and literacy in the multilingual classroom*. (New Jersey: DominiePress-Pearson Learning Group, 2001): 174.

19. Brechtel, Marcia *Bringing it all together: language and literacy in the multilingual classroom*. (New Jersey: DominiePress-Pearson Learning Group, 2001): 177.

20. Langston Hughes. <http://www.poets.org> (accessed July 14, 2008).

21. Martinez, Victor. *Parrot in the oven: mi vida*. (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, Inc., 1996): 7.

22. Martinez, Victor. *Parrot in the Oven: mi vida*. (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, Inc., 1996): 18.

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