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Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative
2008 Volume VIII: American Voices: Listening to Fiction, Poetry, and Prose

Introduction

by Langdon L. Hammer, Professor of English and of American Studies

Young people learning to read literature need to learn to hear voices. This may be especially true for American readers. The literature of this nation arose in a vital culture of oral performance: sermons, speeches, debates, and drama were crucial forms of expression in early America. This tradition lies behind a continuing preoccupation with voice in American literature: over and over again, American writers imagine themselves not as writing, but as speaking, to their readers. Responding to American literature, we respond to its long history of individual voices.

This seminar explored American literature as the creation of particular speakers in multiple forms: fiction, poetry, and prose. We studied and discussed some of the most famous and arresting American voices—the poet who calls to us across time and place in Whitman's "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," the entertaining teenager who narrates *Huckleberry Finn*, and the visionary Civil Rights leader who declared, "I have a dream"—while exploring the rhetorical techniques by which these voices were created, and through which they go on speaking to us today. For voice in writing is always a special kind of illusion through which an author's words, although silent on the page, enter and resound in the reader's mind.

Our readings and discussion included, in sequence, some classics of American literature: sermons and speeches by Patrick Henry, Abraham Lincoln, Sojourner Truth, and Martin Luther King, Jr.; poems by Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson, Robert Frost (and Frost's letters on what he calls "the sound of sense" as well as his lecture "The Imagining Ear") and Langston Hughes; and Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*. We were concerned in all of these classes with the ways in which voice is constructed on the page, and the particular expressive functions of sound in writing.

Twain's novel introduced the question of dialect, and its repeated use of the word "nigger" prompted extended discussion of the history of that word and its usage today. We read and discussed an essay called "Teaching the N-Word" by Emily Bernard, a professor of African American literature at the University of Vermont, which speaks about the author's experience discussing the word in her college classroom. We also read newspaper articles and personal essays dealing with the question of Black English, including material relating to the controversy of the status of Ebonics in the Oakland, California, school system in the 1990s. We read James Baldwin's short essay "If Black English Isn't a Language . . ." and selections from Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple* and Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man*. Ellison's novel, like Twain's, presents a view of American literature as multi-voiced, mixing multiple forms of speech and tradition.

Some of the teachers in our seminar teach students whose first language is Spanish, and we included two weeks of discussion of Latino/a authors who speak of the experience of learning English, and who reflect on

the situation of Spanish speakers in a nation dominated by English. We read essays by and interviews with Richard Rodriguez, and essays and fiction by Julia Alvarez, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Sandra Cisneros. These authors helped us extend our discussion of dialect to the question of language acquisition and the experience of speakers of English as a second language.

My idea in creating this seminar was that a focus on voice would be a useful way into the study of literature for students of all levels. Students are frequently intimidated by reading and writing assignments. In school, they learn to use language in unfamiliar ways; in a sense, even if English is their first language, they are learning another language in school, or, more precisely, they are learning how to use language in new and unfamiliar ways. The challenge is especially acute for students who speak a non-standard dialect or whose first language is not English.

But most students already understand and have access to the power of language through oral experience, and my hope was to devise ways to draw on this strength as we help them come to writing. Students are indeed more often than not resourceful and expressive speakers and shrewd listeners, well acquainted with the pleasure and power of speech from their daily interactions with each other and their families, and from their experience of music, video, and other media. The seminar aimed to develop conceptual and practical strategies for drawing on students' existing talents by using their oral skills to establish a foundation for their work as writers and readers.

The fellows took up this project in a wonderful array of ways in a series of curriculum units designed for a wide spectrum of public school classrooms.

Octavia Utlej has designed a unit that introduces elementary and middle school language arts students to voice through the poetry of Langston Hughes. Utlej's concentrated focus on Hughes sensitizes her students to poetry—to the expressive pleasures and potential of sound—in the context of one important African American writer's work. Using Hughes's biography to frame the poems and suggest connections to her students' own experiences, Utlej also teaches her students about Black History.

Zuri Bryant, working with eighth-graders, also focuses on poetry in her unit, where students read and write poetry. Her premise is that the special emphasis on the sound of words that poetry insists on will give her students access to their own inner voices and a heightened awareness of language as they encounter it in other forms of writing and daily life. Listening, for Bryant, is a step toward learning to speak for one's self and to write in a way that speaks to others.

Like Bryant, Nicole Schubert teaches in an arts academy. Like Utlej, Schubert has designed a language arts curriculum, rich in writing and reading assignments, that could easily be adapted to a class in Black History. Her focus is Frederick Douglass's great autobiography. Schubert introduces her students to the painful yet triumphant history by which American slaves and their advocates fought—often through acts of speech—to grant them the privilege of self-determination and self-representation, everything that "having a voice" means in our society.

The dominance of oral over written forms in African and African American culture, which is sometimes held up as a problem for African American students to overcome, is the exciting starting place of Bonnee Breese's curriculum unit. Breese's unit introduces students to the richness and power of vocal experience—of speaking, singing, and listening—in the cultural traditions of the African diaspora. Focusing on poetry, song, and public speeches, she encourages memorization, recitation, and performance. These "vocalizations" are presented as interpretive, expressive acts that will help form a bridge to writing and reading, even as they serve as

essential cultural forms in themselves.

Like Breese, Sharon Ponder teaches in an inner-city school whose students are challenged by systemic poverty, youth violence, and racial discrimination. Like Schubert and Breese, Ponder approaches voice both as a vital tool of African American self-expression and an important metaphor for hope and social aspiration. Her unit is intended to enable students who feel voiceless in American society to begin to talk about their lives while she introduces them to influential African American voices from James Weldon Johnson to Tupac Shukur, from Countee Cullen to Spike Lee.

Danielle Gothie's students are sixth-graders, rather than the high school students Breese and Ponder teach, and Spanish is the first language of many of them. Her curriculum unit plans to reach these students by exploring the voices they both hear and see in picture books, a form with which they are already comfortable, before moving on to poetry and other forms. Gothie focuses on materials from African American culture and history, including stories, poems, and a video she made in New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina. She wants to give her students a perspective different from the one they are familiar with in their New Mexico community, which they can use to reflect on their own experience.

We see a similar idea in the units created by Victoria Deschere and Karlene McGowen, who invite students to read about the experience of other people and to experiment with writing in the voices of others as a way to develop their own voices. Deschere describes this process as learning "to walk with another author's stride," or in someone else's "shoes." It is a kind of role-playing that will help her young teenagers to establish an identity in writing at a moment in their lives when their identities seem unsettled. Deschere's insight is that voice is not a skill for young writers to develop only once they have mastered the basic elements of composition, but rather the first, essential quality that gives writing purpose and character—that makes it matter to writer and reader alike.

McGowen also wants her middle-school children to experience how authors project themselves in the voices of other people; her intention is to help those students to learn to do the same thing and, in the process, to develop the verbal and imaginative skills to speak for and as themselves. McGowen introduces her students to recent works of realistic fiction for and about young people. She wants them to read books that are relevant to their lives in an immediate, obvious way, while presenting positive attitudes (rather than stories that shock or discomfort young readers); the point for them is to enjoy their reading, and to gain strength from it, as they experiment with their own writing using these models.

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