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2010 Volume III: Creating Lives: An Introduction to Biography

Contando Vidas/Telling Life Stories: The Biographies of Influential Hispanics in Our Community

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Introduction and Rationale

Our struggle is not easy. Those who oppose our cause are rich and powerful, and they have many allies in high places. We are poor. Our allies are few. But we have something the rich do not own. We have our own bodies and spirits and the justice of our cause as our weapons. When we are really honest with ourselves, we must admit that our lives are all that really belong to us. So it is how we use our lives that determine what kind of men we are. It is my deepest belief that only by giving our lives do we find life. I am convinced that the truest act of courage, the strongest act of manliness is to sacrifice ourselves for others in a totally nonviolent struggle for justice. To be a man is to suffer for others. God help us to be men. ¹

Cesar Chavez's words describe La Causa, the struggle to unionize farm workers in California beginning in the 1960s. He spent his life organizing others to fight for fair wages, better living and working conditions, and the right to health care. Through the use of strikes, boycotts, and fasts, Cesar demonstrated his commitment to a cause into which he had been born. His work was his life, destined to make a difference for many people. This is his story – a story of hardship, community service, dedication, and a desire to do for others.

Although my students are not farm workers, many of their parents have been. These young Latino immigrants or migrants are involved in their own struggle. Their diligence and dedication is evident: they work twice as hard as their non-English Language Learner peers to learn the English language and the content area information necessary to be academically successful. Each day, these young people demonstrate the "ganas" (desire) they possess to learn as well as to acclimate themselves to a new school system, country, culture, and way of life. Unfortunately, with a high school drop-out rate of over 50%, and fewer continuing with studies afterwards, their prospects are dismal. This unit aims to encourage my students to see themselves as having a story in front of them which they still have time to shape. Pursing their studies helps to ensure that they will write their own biographies.

Since most of my students stay within our school's transitional bilingual program for more than one year, two-thirds of the students in my 09 – 10 English Language Arts (ELA) class will remain with me in the upcoming year. The students are placed according to English language acquisition levels and all take ELA at the same time. In doing so, we are able to move them freely between classes depending on their increasing English

language ability levels. I teach the highest level in which students are reading anywhere from the third to sixth grade in English. These students had the benefit of being introduced to Shakespeare and his work over the past two years as a direct result of my participation in Yale New Haven Teacher Institute National Initiative. We worked on the idea of identity and character analysis through various Shakespeare plays. Students were able to choose a play they would like to read with others in a literature circle format. About half of the students in our class read Julius Caesar. This play is a story for his life – a biography. I believe that students will be able to take what we have learned and apply it to the new information that we will acquire in this proposed unit on biographies elaborating on a person's life, making the connections necessary to better understand the meaning of another's life.

The subject matter of biography can be divided into two parts – what is a biography (the genre) as well as the stories of the subjects or peoples of those biographies. Students must be able to demonstrate an overall understanding of the genre of biography. As the most popular type of reading material, biography provides an insight into people's lives as well as our own. Samuel Johnson in 1750 in his magazine, *The Rambler*, argues that biographies are educative in nature. Students can profit from learning not only about the subject but themselves as well. ² Students are expected to know about various historically famous people, and many by biographies. In addition, middle school students are very interested in pop culture icons. Learning about their lives and emulating them in some cases is important to these adolescents.

In this proposed unit, students will become familiar with the genre of biography, learning about the components necessary to "tell" a person's life story. Additionally, students will learn about oral history including interviewing techniques. Students will learn the logistics of how to conduct interviews and practice on their classmates as well as a family member or neighbor. In doing so, students will become more comfortable with the techniques associated with this skill before conducting an interview with an influential community member. Numerous resources about Cesar Chavez's life will serve as our model as we construct a biographical sketch about this important Hispanic leader. Afterwards, in teams, students will interview prominent Hispanic members of our community and other people who know them personally and professionally. They will also analyze various documents about these people's lives. These could include letters they have sent, newspaper articles, photographs, among others. Then, they will synthesize the information from their interviews and written document evaluations and write a short biographical sketch about their selected person.

Demographics

Conrad Schools of Science (CSS) is a school in transition, changing into a science and mathematics magnet school serving students in grades 6 – 12. In this upcoming school year, it will finally serve all of these grades and have its first graduating class, making the school population close to 1,000. It is considered an urban school, situated on the outskirts of the largest city in the state of Delaware. CSS students come to our school from all over the county (Delaware has three). This school houses one of the two middle level transitional bilingual programs (Spanish/English) in our district. At CSS, this special program is indeed a "school within a school" serving approximately 85 students in the sixth through eighth grades. They are the only students in the building who do not need to "choice" into the school by completing an application and interview process since this is considered their feeder pattern. This pattern was established before the transition to a magnet school began. Although it is mandatory for our students to attend this school, it is a very positive learning

environment for everyone. Throughout the transition, there has been an increase in student achievement by all those in the building and improved student behavior.

This small group of students is comprised of English Language Learners (ELLs) who share Hispanic ethnicity. As recent immigrants from Latin American countries (mostly Mexico) or migrants from Puerto Rico, they are simultaneously acclimating themselves to a new school system, country, culture, and way of life. These students have all of their content area classes (English Language Arts or ELA, social studies, mathematics, and science) with the program's teachers. I am one of these teachers. These native Spanish-speaking ELLs face many challenges as they enter middle school: reading pressures escalate due to more demanding texts, and they must learn the English language in addition to content area information.

Biography

Who am I? What is my purpose in life? What makes me unique? What is my story? These are all questions that many of us pose during our lifetimes. Trying to make sense of who we are and our purpose for being here is essential to our existence. We also wonder the same things about others. We are curious, wanting to know more about them as this also allows us to learn more about ourselves. Nigel Hamilton writes, "Knowing who you are is, for humans, a fundamental aspect of living; and to a considerable extent that knowledge must depend on knowing who others are, and were, too." ³

As defined in our seminar, a biography is the history of a person told by someone else. It is a story as told by someone who has researched a life using a variety of sources including many primary and secondary sources such as conversations and interviews with the subject and those close to him/her, letters, and newspaper articles, among other materials. Instances of biography include the news, obituaries, funerals, anecdotal notes, personal stories told at cocktail parties, political advertisements, photo albums, resumes, email accounts, reality television, text messaging, students' cum file, among other materials.

It is vital that students understand biography as "a form of narrative, not just a presentation of facts." ⁴ A biography is a story which is told to engage the reader, evoking emotion while making sense of the facts of a life. Each story has a variety of layers suggested by different sources. Each of these gives a point of view, providing a broader perspective on the story which leads one closer to the truth. Chronology, purpose and relationship are important to the telling of a story. Chronology, the order of events is how some describe a life a story. This can be demonstrated with the creation of a time line of the person's activities - what did they do, what happened to them, and when these occurred. A purpose or goal is vital to the telling of life story. Why should someone want to know more about that person? Additionally, a biography indicates a relationship between the biographer and their subject. There is *another* story behind this relationship. The biographer can take an empathetic viewpoint of the subject, as when Elizabeth Gaskell writes about Charlotte Bronte or Samuel Johnson writes about Richard Savage.

Lives are structured around meaningful events. These pivotal moments stand out, giving meaning to other moments around them. ⁵ These moments focus attention on two perspectives - retrospective (a survey of what has happened) and prospective (what will happen in the future, the unknowable). Biography encourages students to see their lives and those of others as unfolding narratives and that they have an opportunity to shape these narratives.

Hermione Lee posits that there are various rules to biographies. First, students should be made aware that the story written should be true, based in fact and scientific inquiry and that this presents some difficulty since issues may arise between fact and interpretation. Second, all sources should be identified. In telling the story of another, there are ethical responsibilities. Ideally biographies should be multi-layered giving a more in-depth picture of a person by varying the resources. If possible, it is vital to know who contributed what information indicating the relationship to the subject and any bias that may be present. Third, the biographer should know the subject and be objective. Research is key in that the writer is giving a neutral and all-encompassing picture of the subject. Fourth, biography is a form of history and an investigation of an identity. It is valuable as it teaches the reader about others and themselves. One is able to reflect on themselves, finding meaning and importance in another's life story. It should be of value for the reader. ⁶

Biographies are popular. People are intrigued, and even obsessed by the lives of others. From reading *People* magazine to watching reality television to listening to biographies on audio books, people want to know what others have done and are doing. Nigel Hamilton begins his book about biography by stating that they have had a long history and controversial status ⁷ and much of this has to do with the "determination of truth and imagination." ⁸ The Collapse of Rome ended the first Golden Age of biographies. During the Middle Ages and beyond, Hagiography, or the writing of saints' lives was introduced. From the Renaissance, the stories of others' lives took on a "commemoration of dead" ⁹ with the purpose of promoting the "moral behavior of the living." ¹⁰ My students have been introduced to Shakespeare, who had a tremendous influence on biography by bringing to life case studies such as Julius Caesar. Victorian biographies produced "exemplary rather than honest lives." ¹¹ Although they were detailed in their descriptions, there was an overall sense of not reporting any details, thoughts or ideas that would depict a person in a negative light. Freud's influence was immense. He delved into the inner thinking and emotional aspects of a person, exposing information about subject's dreams and sexuality. ¹² Later, new media including film helped to transform biographies by giving people's stories a visual representation and wider audience. ¹³

Cesar Chavez and My Students

As I began my research, our seminar leader prompted me to look for commonalities between my students and Cesar Chavez. This is exactly what I want them to be reminded of when they go out and interview prominent Hispanics in our community. I want them to see that they have many things in common with these people, and that they too can achieve whatever these role models have. From the beginning, I knew that I wanted to focus on a prominent Hispanic as a role model, someone who is famous and may be somewhat familiar to the students, with whom I can model the biographer's craft. Students should be able to see themselves in our subject and demonstrate genuine interest in the person. These students have too few opportunities to see themselves in our curriculum. In ELA, there are a few short stories such as "Seventh Grade" by Gary Soto in the anthology. Additionally, they may learn that they are descendents of the Maya or Aztecs in social studies. In studying Cesar Chavez's story, students will be able to identify the many connections that they have with him.

First, and foremost, my students have a pride in their heritage, just as Cesar did. As recent immigrants or migrants to our country, they proudly refer to themselves as Dominicans or Mejjicanos, display their flags on book bags and shirts, and proudly tell about the time that they spend with their families going to stores,

watching movies, and playing games. Cesar came from a very close family. He attributes this to the fact that his parents were "middle-aged" ¹⁴ when they married. They were affectionate and did everything together – work and play. Together, the family worked on the farm, each having a job to do from collecting eggs to making tortillas. His father would spend evenings making toy cars for the children.

The Spanish language is another common factor. My students are all native Spanish speakers. They have grown up in families in which their parents know only the Spanish language. Although they have come to this area, there are many signs in Spanish and people who speak the language. There is a pride in that they feel. Cesar also shared this pride. He stated, "Our language is the reflection of ourselves. A language is an exact reflection of the character and growth of its speakers." ¹⁵ This pride often comes at a price. In both Cesar and my students' cases, schools pose an issue. Cesar's name was changed by a teacher when he entered school from Cesario (after his grandfather) to Cesar. He was also often scolded and hit (corporal punishment was allowed at the time) for using Spanish. Although my students are not scolded for using their native language, some teachers outside of our transitional bilingual program often complain about the students speaking with each other in Spanish.

Facing prejudicial acts and comments is something that they also share with Cesar. As our school population has changed with the transition to a magnet science school, there is evidence of fewer comments from other students against our students. However, we still see anti-immigrant sentiment in the news and in our local area due to a lack of understanding and fear. Cesar also experienced multiple acts of discrimination beginning in his school where he once had to wear a sign that stated, "I am a clown. I speak Spanish." ¹⁶ At times he was physically punished for speaking Spanish.

Coming from families living in poverty is another commonality between my students and Cesar Chavez. All of my students receive free or reduced cost lunch. Mostly all of them have parents who are working more than one job to make ends meet. One parent may work during the day while the other works in the evening. Still others have both parents working, and they go to a neighbor or relative when they return from school. They live in small apartments or share rented homes with other families. Most have difficulty meeting basic needs and have very few funds for things such as field trips or materials for projects.

Movement is another factor in common between them. Most of my students are immigrants from Latin America or migrants from Puerto Rico. There are a few students that have been born in the United States yet have moved back and forth from the USA to Mexico. After losing their family ranch, Cesar and his family became migrant farm workers and spent many years moving from one farm to the next to find work.

Cesar Chavez

Who was Cesar Chavez? What qualities define him? What were the pivotal moments in his life and how did they shape him? How am I like or different from him? These questions arise as you begin to wonder about a person. I want students to focus on the pivotal moments which help to shape a life. Most students, when you ask them to write a biography of someone, they will use the chronology format in which they give basic facts such as the year a person was born and where, what school did he attend, if he married, how many children he had, where he worked, when he died, among others. Although these facts are important to help develop a full picture of someone's life, they do not directly explain how a life is shaped. When reviewing information on

Cesar Chavez, I began to categorize the facts of his life and determine what were the moments or the people behind those moments that greatly influenced his life. I decided upon four: the loss of his family home leading his family into a migrant lifestyle; his mother and grandmother's influence on the ideals of his life's philosophy; his experiences of discrimination in school and the community; and his work with the community service organizations.

Cesar's family lived on what was his father's family's large ranch near Yuma, Arizona. Each of the family members worked on the farm no matter what their age. Cesar and his siblings found themselves feeding the animals, and gathering eggs, among other chores. It was here that he knew migrant workers as they came to work on their farm. He understood that they were very poor people who worked for only a small amount of money, food, or a place to sleep. However, on their farm, his father had built kitchens and showers for them. They always had enough food and a place to sleep. ¹⁷ Cesar grew up during the Great Depression. Due to falling farm products' prices, farmers were forced to borrow money for their future crops and to sustain their families' needs. Later, after the fall harvest, they would pay back the money that they had borrowed. ¹⁸ One year, when Cesar was ten years old, Librado, Cesar's father, had not made enough money during the fall harvest and was unable to get a loan to pay back his debt. The farm was taken away from them.

Cesar's family members were forced to become migrant farm workers in 1937. Their living and working conditions were very different from how Cesar's family had treated their migrant farm workers. Cesar's parents and siblings – eight in total – traveled from farm to farm looking for work throughout the year. They lived in one-room shacks made of sheet metal or sometimes even tents. There was no running water or bathroom. If living conditions were horrible, working conditions were worse. In the fields there were no bathrooms and many times no water to drink during the hard, hot work. The workers participated in "stoop labor" ¹⁹ in which they bent over to pick vegetables or cotton. They also used a short handle hoe of only 18 inches that also made them have severe back issues. ²⁰ Many workers had permanent back damage at a young age. Workers had to pay for everything: the shack, tools, gloves, and food. ²¹ One time, Cesar's family did not even have enough money to pay for the gasoline to get to the next farm to work. They had to wait until money was sent to them from a distant family member. Pesticides were used to protect the plants. These were very dangerous to the workers. It got on their skin. They also drank from the irrigation ditches into which it flowed. Many became sick or died. ²² For all of this hard work they were paid very little. They did not complain because they needed a job and were afraid of losing the only opportunity they had to sustain their families.

As a youngster, his mother, Juana, instilled in him the idea of serving others. This began with the example she gave by never turning away anyone who needed food. She "believed it was her Christian duty to help the poor." ²³ At times, she would even send her children to find someone who might be homeless or in need of a meal. She expected nothing in return, although many wanted to work for what they had received. Juana always had dichos (Mexican proverbs) and stories for children about honesty, obedience, and non-violence. Cesar recollected that her dichos had a purpose. He remembers that all of her stories "were about obedience and honesty and some of the virtues." ²⁴

When I look back, I see her sermons had a tremendous impact on me. I didn't know it was nonviolence then, but after reading Gandhi, St. Francis, and other exponents of nonviolence, I began to clarify that in my mind. Now that I'm older I see she is nonviolent, if anybody is, both by word and deed. She would always talk about not fighting. Despite a culture where you're not a man if you don't fight back, she would say, 'No, it's best to turn the other cheek. God gave you

senses like eyes and mind and tongue, and you can get out of anything.' She would say, 'It takes two to fight. That was her favorite. "It takes two to fight and one can't do it alone.' She had all kinds of proverbs for that. 'It's better to say that he ran from here than to say he died here.' When I was young I didn't realize the wisdom in her words, but it has been proved to me so many times since. ²⁵

Cesar's grandmother, Dorotea, better known as Mama Tella, was another influential person in Cesar's life. He attributes his religious education and dedication to her. From a very young age, he remembers his elderly, almost blind grandmother sitting on the bed always praying. She had grown up in a convent. He would join her in the reciting of the Rosary after which she would tell them about a saint and "drill us in our catechism." ²⁶ Her religious training was so thorough that a priest in Yuma allowed Cesar and his sister, Rita, to skip the church's Communion classes. Her influence instilled an importance of religion.

Your religion just happens to depend a lot on your upbringing and your culture. For me, Christianity happens to be a natural source of faith. I have read what Christ said when he was here. He was very clear in what he meant and knew exactly what he was after. He was extremely radical, and he was for social change. ²⁷

Incidences of discrimination and racism stung Cesar as he grew up in the Southwest. "Signs in stores and restaurants read 'WHITE TRADE ONLY.' Such signs also kept out African Americans and Asian Americans. But other signs made it clear what group was being singled out. They read 'NO DOGS OR MEXICANS ALLOWED.'" ²⁸ This type of racism may have been in response to the fact that this part of the country had once been a part of Mexico. The United States forcefully took over the land in 1846. Mexican culture was very prevalent, and this worried some of the Anglos living there. In Jacques Levy's biography of Cesar, she writes, "He never forgot his father's look of hurt and shock at being ordered from a coffee shop because he was Mexican-American." ²⁹ Another incident which he vividly remembered was when he was out on a date with his future wife, Helen Fabela. While on leave from his service in the Navy, they went to see a movie and were told to move from their seats as they had settled in the Anglo section. They were told to go to Mexican-American section. When he refused, they were escorted out of the theatre. ³⁰

In school, Cesar also faced difficulties which led to his dislike of the institution and experience. From the beginning, he did not care for it. He finished the eighth grade after attending several dozen schools. A point of contention in school was the Spanish language. Most students came from homes in which Spanish was the native language. At school, the teachers spoke English and insisted that the students did as well. This was difficult for Cesar, who did not know English well. Teachers told children they should go back to Mexico if they wanted to speak Spanish. He felt embarrassed and humiliated much of the time as he was acquiring the English language. Many times teachers ridiculed students when they were unable to pronounce a word correctly. He said, "It's a terrible thing when you have your own language and customs, and those are shattered. I remember trying to find out who I was and not being able to understand." ³¹ Teachers also punished those who chose to use the Spanish language. Cesar remembers, "When we spoke Spanish, the teacher swooped down on us. I remember the ruler whistling through the air as its edge came down sharply across my knuckles. It really hurt. Even out in the playground, speaking Spanish brought punishment. The principal had a special paddle that looked like a two by four with a handle on it. The wood was smooth from a lot of use. He would grab us, even the girls, put our head between his legs, and give it to us." ³²

This discrimination, racism, and oppression were at the heart of what Cesar later fought for. He once said,

"How could we progress as a people, even if we lived in the cities, while the farm workers – men and women of our color – were condemned to a life without pride? How could our people believe that their children could become lawyers and doctors and judges and business people while this shame, this injustice, was permitted to continue?"³³

All of these experiences led him to his life-long work of improving the working and living conditions for migrant farm workers. He had first-hand experience of toiling in the fields for very little money. His mother had instilled in him an idea of non-violence and giving to others. He knew the discrimination he had faced was not right and that his people deserved better. Perhaps one memory particularly resonated with Cesar and his interest in organizing people to fight for their rights. In 1939, when his father joined a union in a winter job that he held packing dried fruit, there was a strike, and he saw people coming together to make a change. Although they lost, as strikebreakers were hired to do the work, this experience had a profound impact on Cesar.³⁴ Over the years, he saw his father join union after union in hope of a change.

Two people had an effect on Cesar's involvement in organizing others to fight for justice: Father Donald McDonnell and Fred Ross. Father McDonnell came into Cesar's neighborhood, *Sal Si Puedes* (Leave If You Can), to give mass. Their conversations centered on farm workers and the problems they faced. He gave Cesar books to read about great men, great leaders such as St. Francis and Gandhi.³⁵ Then, he met Fred Ross, an Anglo who worked for the Community Services Organization (CSO) that collaborated with poor people to help to change their communities for the better. Cesar volunteered to help organize people to register to vote. In two months, he registered over 4,000 first-time Mexican Americans voters. He was then asked to be an employee of CSO, organizing people in Oakland, and later in the San Joaquin Valley. His leadership and organizational abilities were evident in all that he did in the name of CSO. In 1958, he was named CSO's national director. During this time they were fighting against the government's Bracero program. Companies were able to hire workers if there were not enough Americans for the work that was available. Companies did so illegally to pay lower wages. Cesar exposed this.

His true desire was to form a union in the name of farm workers. CSO was not interested in this idea. So, four years later, Chavez, with \$1200 in savings, left CSO to form his own organization, which he called the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA), later known as United Farm Workers (UFW). In 1965, the NFWA led a strike of California grape-pickers in the Delano area to demand higher wages. This strike lasted five years and was very difficult for the farm workers and their families. The union received supplemental funds from other unions such as the Autoworkers to help the families. Cesar organized marches and boycotts to further their cause. People were sent to cities around the country to help encourage people to boycott table grapes as a show of support. There were many other supporters: civil rights groups and workers, Robert Kennedy, Martin Luther King, union leaders, the Pope, and churches. There was proof that the farm workers had power together. Then, they were able to bargain for better wages and working conditions. In 1968, Chavez began a 25-day hunger strike, which brought attention to the cause. In 1977, UFW finally was able to organize their farm workers. "From the depth of need and despair, people can work together, can organize themselves to solve their own problems and fill their own needs with dignity and strength".³⁶ Cesar's example demonstrates how this can happen.

Oral History/Interviewing

To complete the project, students will need to learn how to conduct an interview since it is one of the main components of the final project, the biographical sketch. "The whole point of the interview is to get the narrator to tell her story." ³⁷ Active listening is a skill with which many have difficulty. In conversations, most people think about their next comments, what they want to say instead of intently listening to the person who is currently speaking. Managementhelp.org presents guiding information about the preparation for an interview, types of interviews, the general topics and wording of questions and how to sequence them, how to conduct them and what procedures to follow afterwards. ³⁸ My students have had little to no practice with interviewing, so reviewing even the simplest components of the interviewing process is important. Preparation is the key to a good interview, especially for these ELL middle schoolers. To begin with, a conducive environment is needed where there will be no distractions. This helps both parties to focus on the task at hand. The interviewer should then explain the purpose of the interview, indicate how long the interview should take, review the "interview contract" including the logistics of how the information will be gathered and written up, explaining how the interviewee can communicate with them if there is anything they want to add or if they have any questions later. Lastly, the interviewer should ask if the interviewee has any questions regarding the process before the interview begins. Recording the interview can happen in two ways: the use of paper and pen and/or taping the session. Permission should be obtained to use a tape recording device. ³⁹ Since my students are younger and ELLs, writing down all of their subjects' responses may be difficult for them. Most likely, despite preparation, they will be nervous while they conduct their interviews. I believe that given the circumstances of these interviews, it would be better for my students to record them. In doing so, students may return to them later to confirm what their notes say or what they may have missed to add or flesh out information in their biographical sketches.

Much emphasis will be placed on creating questions before students head into their interviews. Six question categories are of importance for interviewing:

1. **Behaviors** - about what a person has done or is doing
2. **Opinions/values** - about what a person thinks about a topic
3. **Feelings** - note that respondents sometimes respond with "I think ..." so be careful to note that you're looking for feelings
4. **Knowledge** - to get facts about a topic
5. **Sensory** - about what people have seen, touched, heard, tasted or smelled
6. **Background/demographics** - standard background questions, such as age, education, etc. ⁴⁰

The questions will be written in a brief outline form, mostly in an open-ended fashion. Not wording the questions directly will help to be certain that it does not "sound like a canned speech when you read it." ⁴¹ Questions should also be narrow and then focus on specific facts. ⁴²

Objectives

Our state's recommended curriculum units are created following the Understanding by Design model based on research and theory by Grant and Wiggins.³³ The overarching idea is to teach for understanding beginning from the end, focusing on what you want students to know. Enduring Understandings are the big ideas of the unit and are vital to students' comprehension of content and concepts. They have lasting value and help to make the content meaningful. Students will recognize that the genre of biography is influential in our society and that biographies not only have a pattern which enables one to tell the story of another's life but it sees the life as a story. In addition, they will realize that a writer makes a variety of choices which influence the reader and that interviewing is an essential skill in acquiring information for the writing of a biography. Moreover, they will understand that readers are able to recognize their own thoughts and behaviors – see themselves – in the lives of others as good readers are able to make connections to the text. Lastly, critical readers learn to locate, evaluate, and use evidence

Strategies

Incorporating literacy skills into each lesson is essential to my students' success. This is especially true for adolescent ELLs who are reading well below grade level. If students receive additional reading instruction in the content areas, they will be able to transfer these skills to the other subject areas. I have seen this occur in my own classroom in which I am responsible for English and Social Studies instruction. The literacy skills students learn in English class are successfully transferred to our Social Studies class. My ultimate goal is to enable students to be successful both linguistically and academically when they are mainstreamed into a regular education classroom.

Proficient Reading Strategies

Although about two-thirds of the students have already been in our class, many, if not all, will need assistance to become proficient in the use of or familiar again with the reading strategies. They are able to learn these strategies by having a teacher explain, demonstrate, and apply them while reading. I will do just that during the teaching of the book, *The Circuit*, a series of short stories based on the life of the author, Francisco Jimenez, who grew up as a migrant farm worker. This will serve as a springboard for the unit's focus on Cesar Chavez. Students will be able to connect to many of the stories, especially the ones about family life and school. Additionally, the use of Spanish within the text will be familiar for the students. It is vital to allow for opportunities to practice the strategies with the students, providing feedback and time for discussion. ELLs' use of proficient reader strategies (predicting, making connections, questioning, inferring, visualizing, determining the main idea, and summarizing) to assist them before, during, and after reading is critical to their comprehension of complex texts. All of these strategies can provide ELLs with the tools they need to construct meaning from the complex texts that they are required to read in all of their content area classes.

Vocabulary Development

Vocabulary development activities help to highlight the most important words for text comprehension. These

activities help to change students' understanding of the meanings through direct instruction and context. Children learn the majority of their vocabulary indirectly in the following three ways: conversations with adults, adults reading to them, and reading on their own. Explicit instruction in vocabulary is critical to increase ELLs text comprehension and content knowledge.

As a teacher, one becomes aware of a variety of barriers to vocabulary development. These include the complexity of the English language, word poverty, and lack of background or prior knowledge. All of which present issues for teachers. In addition, ELLs' parents are not proficient in English and are unable to help in the home. Despite this, there are some tips for teachers in regard to vocabulary development. First, start with what students already know, build new terms and concepts on this information. Second, provide students with multiple exposures to new terms and concepts. They need varied activities to remember the words and their meanings. Third, include discussion as one of the vocabulary activities. Lastly, teaching vocabulary words through the content is more effective than teaching in isolation. Vocabulary needs to be taught explicitly and be part of the daily curriculum.

Graphic Organizers

A graphic organizer is "a visual and graphic display that depicts the relationships among facts, terms, and ideas within a learning task." ⁴³ In my classroom, two of the first words students learn in English are "graphic" and "organizers"! Using graphic organizers helps to make content more supportive for students, scaffolding the information to be learned and giving them access to content that otherwise might be too difficult for them. This also helps to organize complex information into a much easier-to-read format ⁴⁴ which is helpful to ELLs. In our case, we will use graphic organizers to organize the general information pertaining to biography so that they can get a visual picture of the important concepts related to biography. Additionally, they will create graphic organizers of the information that they read from the variety of sources they will research about Cesar Chavez and the prominent Hispanic person whom they will be interviewing.

Teacher Modeling Including Read-Aloud and Think-Aloud

Teacher modeling will be used in a variety of ways. Specific types of teacher modeling include the Teacher Read-Aloud and Think-Aloud. How students read is as important as what they read. Reading aloud is an important tool, even for older learners. The text that is read aloud is usually above students' reading comprehension level but not their listening level. ⁴⁵ It can be used to allow students to focus on comprehension rather than worrying about pronouncing everything correctly. At the same time, it does also provide a model of expressive reading and correct pronunciation. It makes the text more accessible, builds the students' oral English capability, and helps them construct meaning from the text. ⁴⁶ A teacher read-aloud is used because of the students' limited English proficiency levels. Teacher think-alouds are vital for students to hear someone, in this case the teacher, verbalize the process of reading by using the proficient reading strategies. Fitzgerald and Graves ⁴⁷ posit that this helps students to glean more meaning and interest from the text. I will model the English language for the students. The read-aloud provides students access to the true language of the stories without making them frustrated with the text itself. Students will have multiple opportunities to hear me read this language before they try it for themselves. Preparation for a read-aloud is important. One should practice reading the passage ahead of time as well as mark out places in which you would like to stop so that students can hear you make predictions and connections and ask questions.

Additionally, I will model the interviewing process on numerous occasions in a "fishbowl" format. Students will be completely new to this concept. They will need explicit instruction in how to conduct a good interview. This

will begin with brainstorming about what a good interview looks and sounds like. Then, they will need to experience this. I will invite administrators and/or colleagues into our classroom. The interviewer (me) and interviewee (administrator/colleague) will be in the middle of a circle with all of the students surrounding us. We will practice the interview techniques we have learned about and students will take notes using a graphic organizer to evaluate the interview. In doing so, students will be able envision what an interview is and how to conduct one.

Collaborative Learning/Groupwork

Students need to learn how to work together to accomplish goals – those set by the teacher and by themselves. This is a basic requirement for many positions or jobs that they will hold in the future. Working together, relying on each other helps to build team working skills. In collaborative learning, each group member is accountable to each other, dependent upon each other and contributes the established goals. Everyone has some strength to share. ⁴⁸ Together, more is accomplished. Opportunities to learn about each other before and while working help to promote the camaraderie and cohesiveness necessary to work well together. Individual and group evaluations are necessary to monitor the group's work (product) and their progress in teamwork.

Classroom Activities

Lesson One - Biographies

What is a biography? How does the form of biography enter into our understanding of the form of a life? How does biography have influence on our society? How do biographies mirror what is socially acceptable and important while telling a person's life?

This introductory lesson gives students an opportunity to learn about what a biography is and the biographer's crafting of a person's life story.

Anticipatory Set: Have students brainstorm facts about a person (teacher or classmate). Write these down in their learning journals. Ask questions about the information. Compare and contrast what was listed.

Directed Instruction: Introduce the genre of biography. In groups, have students list the types of biographies such as obituaries and reality television. They may not have many answers. However, they should share out the ones they have brainstormed. View PowerPoint about biographies and take notes on graphic organizer.

Activity: Students will be divided first into pairs and then groups of four to read and discuss a variety of text excerpts from different biographies. Students will use their Proficient Reading Strategies to better comprehend what they are reading. They will compare and contrast their observations to better understand the components of a biography.

Assessment: Students' *Check for Understanding* in which they will need to explain what is a biography, its characteristics, and why it is useful in understanding others and ourselves.

Lesson Two - Cesar Chavez - Biography Model

What qualities define this person? What is the purpose of his life story? How am I like this person? How am I different from this person? How do good readers use the texts to make connections with themselves, other texts, and the world?

This lesson enables the teacher to help students understand that a person's life story can be categorized into pivotal moments and/or influential people.

Anticipatory Set: First, have students make lists of eight important events or people in their lives. Students should explain their reason of importance. Second, students should share their lists with their group members. Third, instruct students that they should create "categories" from their lists (e.g., family, school, country of origin, among others).

Directed Instruction: Have students connect what they have learned to what they will learn about Cesar Chavez by showing a video of the life of Cesar Chavez (various resources are available on the Internet). Have students brainstorm the "categories" they see in the film depicting his life. E.g., school, family, marriage, work, etc. and include the facts that they learned from the video on an investigative graphic organizer that students can add additional facts to throughout the unit.

Activity: Students will be divided into small groups. Each group will receive a variety of primary source documents regarding a pivotal moment (category) of Cesar Chavez's life – family influence (father, mother, and grandmother), migrant lifestyle, school and community experiences with discrimination, and union/community work. Students will review their documents, analyze them, ask/answer questions about him and determine what is the pivotal moment (category) to which these documents pertain and explain why/how they know this. They will record their findings, citing evidence from the sources to support their opinions on their investigation graphic organizer.

Assessment: Students' individual investigation graphic organizer

Lesson Three - Contando Vidas/Telling Life Stories

Why am I writing? For who? What am I trying to achieve through my writing? Who will read my writing? What will work best for my audience? How does an interview help to shape one's writing?

This lesson enables the teacher to model and introduce interview techniques for students.

Anticipatory Set: In the spirit of a *Book Pass* in which students view and evaluate a variety of books to choose one to read, students will have a few sentences regarding the prominent Hispanic community members that they will be interviewing to choose from. These people include a psychologist, a Manager in charge of Probation and Parole, a Manager in charge of the English Language Learner program for our school district, a director of the local Latin American Community Center, a judge, and a business owner. Students will view these and indicate who they would like to interview and who they want on their interview team.

Directed Instruction: This portion of the lesson will need to be completed over an extended amount of time. Students will be informed of the components of an interview in multiple ways: PowerPoint presentation, numerous good and bad interview fishbowl models, classmate interview practice, and additional practice outside of school.

Activity: Students will conduct their own interviews with classmates. These will be taped. Students will evaluate their performance and determine goals as to how to improve on their developing interviewing skills.

Assessment: Interview Self Rubrics

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Falstein, Mark. *Freedom Fighters Cesar Chavez*. Parsippany: Pearson Learning Group, 1994. Children's literature piece that focuses on Cesar Chavez's life. Good photographs of him throughout his lifetime.

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Free Management Library. <http://www.managementhelp.org/evaluatn/interview.htm> (accessed July 10, 2010). This website provides a step-by-step process on how to prepare, conduct, and follow-up on an interview.

Gonzales, Doreen. *Cesar Chavez Leader for Migrant Farm Workers*. Berkeley Heights: Enslow Publishers, Inc., 1996. Geared towards readers in grades 5 - 9, this book provides more detailed information about Cesar Chavez.

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Hamilton, Nigel. *The Task of Biography A Primer*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008. Anyone that is interested in writing a biography should benefit from reading this step-by-step process on "how to".

Lee, Hermoine. *Biography A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. An additional teacher resource that explicitly explains about the genre of biography.

Levy, Jacques E. *Cesar Chavez Autobiography of La Causa*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company Inc. , 1975. An excellent resource with many first-hand accounts from Cesar Chavez himself.

Ritchie, Donald A. *Doing Oral History A Practical Guide*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003. Excellent teacher resource that explains how to conduct oral history. The chapters are divided so that one may only use one or two for their purpose. Using it in this manner, it could also be a good resource for high school students.

Study Guides and Strategies. <http://studygs.net> (accessed July 11, 2010). Provides practical knowledge regarding learning to work with others.

Appendices

Appendix A

- DE ELA #1 Use written and oral English appropriate for various purposes and audiences.
- DE ELA #2 Construct, examine, and extend the meaning of literary, informative, and technical texts through listening, reading, and viewing.
- DE ELA #3 Access, organize, and evaluate information gained through listening, reading, and viewing.
- DE ELA #4 Use literary knowledge accessed through print and visual media to connect self to society and culture.

This unit addresses each of the English Language Arts standards. Students will be reading (#2) various types of texts to comprehend (#3) Cesar Chavez's life story and to analyze different forms of biography. They will make connections to themselves (#4) in their discussions with their group members and write a biographical sketch of a prominent Hispanic community leader (#1).

Endnotes:

1. Jacques E. Levy, *Cesar Chavez Autobiography of La Causa*, 286.
2. Hermione Lee, *Biography A Very Short Introduction*, 47.
3. Nigel Hamilton, *Biography: A Brief History*, 8.
4. Hermione Lee, *Biography A Very Short Introduction*, 5.
5. Langdon Hammer, "Creating Lives: An Introduction to Biography," National Initiative Seminar, 2010.
6. Hermione Lee, *Biography A Very Short Introduction*, 6 – 18.
7. Nigel Hamilton, *The Task of Biography*, 4.
8. Ibid, Preface.
9. Ibid, 61.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid, 111.
12. Hermione Lee, *Biography A Very Short Introduction*, 86.
13. Nigel Hamilton, *Biography A Brief History*, 222
14. Ibid, 17.
15. http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/c/cesar_chavez.html (accessed July 9, 2010).
16. Kathleen Krull, *Harvesting Hope: The Story of Cesar Chavez*, 12.
17. Mark Falstein, *Freedom Fighters Cesar Chavez*, 6.
18. 18Ibid.
19. Ruth Franchere, *Cesar Chavez*, 17.
20. Doreen Gonzales, *Cesar Chavez Leader for Migrant Farm Workers*, 59.
21. Ibid, 9.
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28. Mark Falstein, *Freedom Fighters Cesar Chavez*, 11.
29. Doreen Gonzales, *Cesar Chavez Leader for Migrant Farm Workers*, 41.
30. Ruth Franchere, *Cesar Chavez* 27
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32. Ibid.
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43. Hall and Strangman. "CAST Universal Design for Learning: Graphic Organizers." 2002.
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46. Jill Fitzgerald and Michael F. Graves, *Scaffolding Reading Experiences for English Language Learners*, 165.
47. Ibid.
48. <http://www.studygs.net> (accessed July 13, 2009).

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