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Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative
2010 Volume III: Creating Lives: An Introduction to Biography

Connecting to Community: Biography and the Digital Age

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Introduction

Students today are living and learning in a complicated age when the insistence on human connection through digital media sets up barriers to human contact, and too often one's story is a Wikipedia chunk, someone's blog rant, or a *Facebook* tale. Concerns about the economy, the environment, and terrorism overwhelm students, and standardized testing affects their self-worth. All of these factors diminish the power of their own narratives.

This curriculum unit, Connecting to *Community: Biography and the Digital Age* is intended to use the storytelling structure of biography as a pathway for students to develop deeper relationships with each other, with a text, and with themselves. With an emphasis on biography as a story, the unit will primarily focus on three narrative implications of biography: the relationship to the reader, formation of identity, and the description of place.

By examining biography as a literary *form*, a "container," a student can feel safe to engage in a reciprocal and human relationship. So often a student who lives with the trauma associated of inner city poverty will stuff his stories where they never have to be told or he simply fabricates stories where there is little distinction between reality and fiction. Reading Art Spiegelman's *Maus* is one of the ways students will begin to have a deeper understanding of the effects of trauma because of the cultural distance the book offers. Art Spiegelman, the author, artist, and principle narrator, tells the biographical memoir of his parents who survived the Nazi Holocaust and internment at Auschwitz concentration camps. While the biography is presented in graphic novel form, the important feature is how it is based on (and dramatizes the process of) oral history because it is the story of Art listening and reacting to his father, Vladek. The biography also looks at trauma through a personal lense: Spiegelman contains the private pain of taking on his parent's trauma because it would never compare to the magnitude of his parents traumatic experience.

The literary understanding of biography will allow a student to tell another's story without this story being a direct reflection of his own life. The biography becomes as much about the life of the other person as it does about the validation of the authors life. A student learns a profound lesson of responsibility by becoming a "Biographer." When representing someone's story, in essence taking care of them, and there must be a responsibility to the facts of this person's life. The semester long curriculum is intended for high school students to have a firm definition of biography so that they may gradually develop a deeper sense of its form.

Background

I teach in a Title I High School that has a demographic population of 98% African-American, 1% Hispanic and 1% Caucasian. The school is bordered on one side by a major freeway, and on the other side by five consecutive housing projects. 82% of the students who attend the school live in one of the projects, 10% of the students live in adjoining communities, and 8% live outside of the school zoning and are allowed entrance based upon the school's policy of open enrollment. More often than not those who attend on an open enrollment status do so because they are court ordered, released from a detention center, or expelled from another school.

The entrance of the school has three large doors with each door being framed by an electronic airport-style metal detector. These three doors lock promptly thirty minutes after the first class of the morning begins and remain locked until the final bell of the day at which time students promptly leave on the same yellow school bus in which they arrived. With limited afterschool clubs and activities, the long school hallways are often vacant and silent twenty minutes after the final bell of the day.

Because of the school's insistence on the transparency of personal items for safety purposes, students are not allowed to bring a backpack or a bag lunch. The lunches, which are usually prepared off site and delivered each morning, cost students three dollars.

The 100,000 square foot interior of the school has two floors and is divided into hallways and wings. There are eight security guards who patrol the school's inside borders and two Richmond City policemen who are stationed there full time. The school, which is the oldest in the Richmond Public Schools, has had several locations since its inception in 1867. In its most recent incarnation (completed in 1992), the school was built to house 1,300 students. The total enrollment for 2009/2010 school year hovered at roughly 725 students, but the average daily attendance was usually around 600 students.

While such facts and numbers do not suggest an ideal learning environment, a school-wide renaissance of thought and action is beginning to percolate among the administration, faculty, and community. One notion that is glaringly clear is the lack of distinction between a student's community and home environment and his learning environment at school. The safe-haven, protective quality from the outside world that many school environments offer for students has become quite diluted with those recognizable agents that protect us all from aggression and threat. From a biographical perspective, what is entirely fascinating about this contradiction is the psychological and emotional irony that is played out with the students I teach. Those prefab walls they have assembled to protect themselves and their identities are only accentuated by a school environment that literally and figuratively contains them.

So often public school language art courses focus on teaching the breadth of literature. Nearly every secondary school has a course entitled Introduction To Literature or American Literature or British Literature. But the semester long examination of biography is different. The extended study creates a way for students to intimately understand biography as a form. For students who have experienced trauma in their communities and aggression in their school environments, it can begin to help them internalize the sacred, safe place that is a school and that is their life.

Rationale

My rationale for developing a unit centered on biography and storytelling is rather multilayered. On one level, the form (or container) of biography gives a student a defined space for him to explore a life outside of himself. Many youth are raising themselves in homes and communities that offer few boundaries or rules. If there is one thing that kids crave, regardless of their socio-economic condition, it is the safety of a recurring expectation. And for so many kids, the only expectation they have of themselves is self-preservation, and the only rules they abide by are ones they have constructed for themselves. At a very young age, kids must make a developmental leap in the formation of their identity that they are not equipped to understand. Because there is no GPS for this skill, children will often construct a shell around themselves in order to protect their identity. And if this shell is not cracked or at least acknowledged by adults in an educational setting, that un-channeled life and story becomes toxic and potentially explosive. In *Children in a Violent Society*, a collection of essays edited by Joy D. Osofsky, Marans and Adelman write, "When there is no one available to listen, children are alone with the distress and disorganization that so often follows their close encounters with interpersonal violence. On their own, attempts to recover from over- whelming fear, uncertainty, and helplessness may be at a very high price to children's developmental potential as well as to the communities that have been unable to protect or support them". (1) The empowerment associated with the subconscious understanding that you are supported and loved by your family or community (and if provided for organically, this is often what teenagers rebel against in their quest for autonomy and self-determination) has given way to a very "unnatural" manner in which poor, inner-city youth rebel because they are scared of their own independence. In a way, their rebellion is a collective cry, "See our lives, listen to our stories."

This "cry" is often an existential turning point for emotional growth in human beings. In fact, in Biography: *A Very Short Introduction*, Hermione Lee recounts Virginia Woolf's narrative struggle in actualizing her own existence: "...she said of her own life: 'I see myself as a fish in a stream; deflected; held in place; but cannot describe the stream."(2)

Woolf condenses quite profoundly the difficulty of exposing the conditions that create one's identity. If the "stream" cannot be described, neither can the "fish."(3) In some ways, Woolf, in defining her own struggle (or desire) to be "seen," articulates the same struggle that a child in a violent, urban environment has regarding his living conditions. There's an interesting duality that happens for a child when he constructs an emotional shell around himself: he is not only protecting himself from his community, but he is protecting the community as well. His home is his community and his community is his home. No matter how a child feels about each, there is a sacredness there...even if it is encapsulated in a yearning (or a sense of loss) for what those two environments could and should provide. And as Lee points out, "Biography even more than autobiography (where the writer can choose how much to talk about the world surrounding the self), has a duty to the stream as well as to the fish." (4)

The brilliance of working with the form of biography with students who steadily protect themselves from their conditions is that it is a way to *critically* engage in the world of others without having to identify that world as their own. A student who has only known the traumatic side of a poor, aggressive and often dangerous urban environment has little awareness of other cultures and people who lie just beyond the boundaries of his community. On a cognitive level, he does not perceive his environment as pitiable, but on a emotional level the student can certainly intuit the threat that is so often rooted in the same community. When a student can empirically connect with another's experience, that self-imposed shell begins to splinter. Whether the person

whose story he chooses to tell is an elder, community leader, or parent, a student can begin to extrapolate from an experience, an era, or a relationship, information that can allow him to articulate sentiments about his own community.

Another component to my unit on biography is the gradual empowerment a student experiences in becoming a "Biographer." There's a certain ownership and power that comes with the evolving process of telling someone else's story. Students are not simply completing work in order to receive a grade. In the same manner that students work towards becoming an "Athlete," "President," or "Valedictorian," those working towards the completion of this unit become a "Biographer." I have experienced within my peer work culture adults who have sacrificed pay for a better title. The title signifies status, builds self-esteem, which in turn creates more pride in one's work. In a culture of urban poverty, the names so often bestowed are derogatory and offensive but tolerated as a standard. As a teacher, I am in a constant state of redirecting this norm in language…it's not about creating a punitive measure for the use of a word. It's about creating an awareness of appropriate, empowering language. With this unit, there is the opportunity for a student to earn a name for their achievement: Biographer.

Strategies

The unit is designed to be broken down into four modules that can be taught individually, but most optimally as a collective semester long unit. The semester long unit is intended for students to develop a "relationship" with Biography over the course of a semester. The "relationship" is built around this idea of continually revisiting the topic of Biography so that it becomes the guiding principle over the course of the semester, rather than a lesson that is wedged between other lessons. Evident from exceptionally low test scores and basic reading ability that is far below high school grade level, a majority of students educated in poor urban schools, having been shuffled through a school district system, have never experienced such a depth of study.

The scaffolding approach to the Biography unit allows students to develop "critical literacy" skills so that may have the ability to "produce print, aural, and visual forms of communication." (5) Lev Vygotsky defined scaffolding (originating from his theory of the zone of proximal development (*zpd*)) instruction as the "role of teachers and others in supporting the learner's development and providing support structures to get to that next stage or level". (6) Therefore, the goal of the educator, when using the scaffolding teaching strategy, is for the student to become an independent and self-regulating learner and problem-solver. (7) In order to access prior knowledge about biography, biographies they might have been introduced to in the primary grades will be revisited in class. Based upon their memory and experience with these biographies, students will complete a rubric about what they remember about biographies and engage in a conversation about their rediscovery of Biography.

The core of the unit is broken down into four sections and based upon the acronym POW'D: Portfolio, Oral, Writing, Digital.

Writing

The first section of the unit establishes the biography "container." The "container's" purpose is two-fold:

1. It establishes the definition of biography that will become the foundation of the unit. The definition lays

the groundwork of form, which is essential. The form of biography gives students the tools to freely create their own biographies as the unit progresses.

2. It establishes the profound significance of biography and the stories of lives students will read about and the stories of lives student will write about. When students are in the "container," they understand that a cauldron of (repressed) emotions may present themselves, and if they do, we have to honor that emotion. Students can begin to actualize the fluidity of being in and out of the "container." In some ways, this section of the unit is as much a study in the definition and form of biography as it is about developing an emotional intelligence as they listen to various life stories.

In the scope of the biography unit, *Writing* is analogous to the more traditional and organic ideas of literacy: students read, students write. There are two reasons to teach the *Maus* at this point in the unit. As a graphic novel, it implicitly accommodates the visual and spatial learner. As a biographical memoir, it allows students who have experienced a specific unrecognizable trauma to have some aesthetic distance by drawing them into a world which is entirely different but where the traumatic schema of thought is present. There are several components this section of the unit will focus on:

- Defining biography: examination of its meaning and form
- Reading/Critical Analysis: *Maus* by Art Spiegelman
- Use of literature circles as tool for student engagement and assessment
- Interviewing Skills: developing literacy skills in the interview process
- Writing/Editing: the formation of their written interview.

Oral

In this section of the Biography unit, *ORAL* interweaves the notion that students combine the knowledge of communities well beyond their homes (knowledge they are already receiving in History, World Cultures, and ELP courses) with knowledge of their rooted community. The ORAL gives students the opportunity to interview someone much older if possible, using the subject's life story as a window on the past. A major component of the teaching methodology of the oral interview as a form of biography is to engage students in the planning, conducting, and review of the interviews. This tends to be a successful strategy for those students with weak literacy skills because it builds upon the oral tradition of the student and their community. It also allows students who are struggling with reading and writing to approach literacy development laterally. The modalities of this section introduce the student to the importance of oral history as a necessary way to compensate for the digital age. Biographers in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries could rely on letters and diaries as forms of evidence. But today's world is characterized by the transitory records of texts, emails, and phone calls. Oral history is an important way of preserving the personal history of the late twentieth and twenty-first century. The following are modalities that will be explored in the unit:

- Web based models of oral biography: storycorp.org, tellingstories.org, doingoralhistory.org -Techniques on conducting the conversational style of interview.
- Tutorials on how to use the recording devices and the audio software.
- Editing the oral biography so that it distills a single emotion or thought.

Digital

The inclusion of *Digital* is intended to create a way for students to expand their understanding of biography, and accommodate a differentiated manner of learning. Students have the opportunity to contextualize the written and oral into a visual media piece that is driven by a multi-sensory experience. There is a potentially

transcendent experience a student has by not only collecting images, letters, and sound from their interviewee but also by editing and arranging them into a biographical story that is both visual and aural. A student can understand the human complexity of crafting a biography: the life of their subject and the life in the context of culture and history. In the introduction to *The Haunting Of Sylvia Plath*, Jacqueline Rose considers Plath's complexity: "Plath is neither one identity, nor multiple identities simply dispersing themselves. She writes at the point of tension – pleasure/danger, your fault/my fault, high/low culture – without resolution or dissipation of what produces the clash between the two." (8) Rose personally acknowledged reading Plath as a "type of analyst of her critics and culture alike" and discloses how this journey "into" Plath "haunts" her. (9) Not that students will be haunted by their interviewee, but just as Rose exposed what was emotionally at stake in her biography of Plath, students should come away with some kind of emotional relationship with their subject.

Portfolio

Although the *PORTFOLIO* is the final module in which the publication and presentation of student work is examined, the portfolio culture develops at the inception of the unit. By the time a student gets to this stage, he is already beginning to work on habits of self-reflection. A student has the opportunity to present a draft of his interview, a recording of his oral history interview, and the digital film of his biography as evidence of his intellectual and artistic development. Interviewees, parents, teachers, administrators, and other community members will be invited to experience the completed biographies and participate in the assessment of the student learning. The idea is to honor the lives of those interviewed as well as commend the students for honoring those lives. Students will have the opportunity to answer questions about their experience and what they have learned about their interviewee, the history and culture of this person's life.

The Process

The intention of the sequence of modules and classroom activities is to serve as template or guide for the biography unit and can be adapted to suit another class situation or school environment. While the unit is intended for high school students, middle school teachers could replace *Maus* with a biography more suited to a middle school grade level. The activities are designed for classes that meet on block scheduling, every other day for 90 minutes at a time. The length of the lessons can vary depending on the depth of a classroom discussion. Students receive credit towards their grades by participating. The reading, writing prompts, and oral presentations all address the state standards in English/Language Arts. In addition to Language Arts standards, the module-based lessons on biography touch on a number of Virginia state-mandated standards of learning concepts, and are designed to complement and reinforce core subjects by providing alternative experiences: i.e. developing literacy skills using computers/technology, and learning outside of the academic classroom.

Writing

The unit begins with *Writing* where students will recognize traditional reading and writing lessons. This is also the point where students will begin to create the biography container. This is an imperative process in the initial stages of biography because it establishes the significance and emotion of stories. In the Writing module students will create a class definition of biography; read, critically analyze, and discuss *Maus*; research,

interview, and write a biography on an elder (either a family member or someone a student has a connection with).

Lesson One: Defining biography

Objectives:

- to access prior knowledge by revisiting biographies students might have been introduced to in elementary/middle school.
- to have students work individually and collaboratively on creating a definition of "biography".

Step1: Prior Knowledge

Have a variety of elementary and middle school biographies that students might remember. Conceptually, the idea is to move students from the macro to the micro. The biographies should be ones students would recognize from elementary school: basic, factual narratives of famous people. Some wonderful examples of elementary school biographies are a Picture *Book of Ben Franklin* by David Adler; *George Washington's First Victory* by Stephen Kenskey; and *Abraham Lincoln's Hat* by Martha Brenner. Any of these threes texts can be read fairly quickly to the class. Some exceptional middle school biographies include: Twice Toward Justice: *The Story of Claudette Colvin* by Phillip Hoose; *The Last Seven Months of Anne Frank* by Willy Lindwer; and *East Side Dreams* by Art Rodriquez. Begin to chart some of the responses and have students take notes about each text and about some of the similarities and differences of each level of text. Examine the choices made in terms of title, cover illustrations, font and size, page number and size of the book, summarization on the back. After comparing and contrasting the elementary and middle school biography examples, show students a copy of *Maus*. In the same way elementary and middle school biographies were compared and contrasted, have students do the same for *Maus*. Explain to students that *Maus* is the biography that will be read for this unit and how it is an illustrative and graphic amalgamation of elementary and middle school biographies, but the content definitely geared for upper school students.

Step 2: Individual Definition

First you'll be working individually with students to have them generate a group definition. Write the word biography in a large space in the classroom (i.e. overhead projector, white board, chalk board). Ask students to write out their individual definition of biography in their notebooks. You may want to write the question, "What is a *biography*?" underneath the word *biography* on your overhead. Give the students two to three minutes to write. Discourage students from looking in the dictionary or computer. Ask them to trust their knowledge.

Step 3: Present

After two minutes or so, ask for volunteers to share their definitions. Write the different definitions on the overhead as students share them. Ask students to look at the definitions that have already been given. The class will agree upon useful definitions.

Step 4: Combining Definitions

Students may like a particular answer and want to make some changes to it. Since this a class definition, go ahead and make the changes as appropriate, checking in with students to make sure it is functional. From those definitions that the students consider useful, the class will create one definition that will establish the

properties (and rules) of biography.

Step 5: Group Definition

When you have come up with one single definition, read it back to the students. (Some students might come up with the definition the first time they try together, "A biography is a true story about a persons life, but it is written by somebody else.")

Step 6: Dictionary Definition

Now, ask a student to look up *biography* in a dictionary. Have the student read it out loud to the class. How close is their definition? Is there anything they would like to add or delete? Do this with them on the overhead, or whiteboard, as they will use their definition as the foundation of *biography* throughout this unit. Do not allow students to use the dictionary definition, as they have worked hard to put their knowledge and ideas into their own words. This exercise is as much about the collaborative process of understanding the ownership of language as it is about the definition of the word, *biography*.

Lesson Two: Maus *by Art Spiegelman*

Objectives:

- identify some of the major events of the Holocaust as recounted by Vladek Spiegelman
- identify themes and issues presented in the book
- identify character traits of the major characters
- analyze the exchange of feelings between Art Spiegelman and his parents
- analyze the use of animals to represent races/nationalities
- analyze the changes of time that occur in the chapters and the turning point(s)
- analyze the use of graphics in the book and their relationship to the story

Step 1 – Introduction of Maus and the graphic novel genre

I will introduce the book to the class and discuss the graphic novel genre. Examples of other graphic novels and comic books may be shown. Students are asked to draw on their experiences with comic strips, comic books, and graphic novels to develop characteristics of each; these may be displayed in a graphic organizer or in table form. After giving some background information on Maus and its author, ask students about their knowledge of the Holocaust. Use a journal prompt to learn what students know about the Holocaust and what they want to learn, or how they think comics can be used to treat a serious topic.

Step 2: Prologue Class Read

The entire class reads the prologue and the first chapter of the first volume. When students have read these sections, the teacher initiates a discussion following previously agreed upon rules regarding group discussions. Because literature circles are reader response centered, students should direct the discussion with teacher guidance.

- I might begin the discussion by asking the class what their initial impressions are about the combination of comics and the serious topic of the Holocaust or what they think about Spiegelman's use of animal heads with human bodies as characters. The teacher should encourage students to use specific examples from the book as they draw conclusions and offer observations and opinions.

- Students might add words with which they are unfamiliar to a class list posted on the bulletin board or in their journals and research definitions.
- I will have a list of discussion questions ready in case the discussion bogs down (see a suggested list by chapter near the end of this section).
- The discussion should take no longer than about fifteen to twenty minutes and should provide a model for discussions that will take place later in small groups. At the end of the discussion, the teacher divides the class into literature circles of four to six students, grouping students heterogeneously where possible. These groups will meet as scheduled to discuss the remaining chapters of the book.

Step 3: Group Discussions

Over the period of the scheduled reading dates and discussion dates, students read the chapters of the books and meet to discuss them. Each meeting will focus on a specific chapter (or chapters). During these small group discussions, the teacher may observe in order to keep students focused and for purposes of assessment, but the discussion should be student centered. Students will journal their responses to the reading and to the discussion process. Journal prompts may be keyed to specific chapters to focus student thinking if necessary

Step 4: Visualizing Key Elements

Students will be asked to visualize key elements of the book:

- Character maps (see an example at)
- Table showing parallels between the public events of the Holocaust and the private life of the Spiegelmans
- Table or graphic organizer showing examples (with page references and/or quotes) of the themes of irony, intergenerational conflict, depression and suicide, guilt, dominance, racism, etc. Templates of graphic organizers may be found at http://www.eduplace.com/ graphicorganizer/ and at http://www.graphic.org/goindex.html, or the students can use Inspiration or Kidspiration software if available.
- Graphic organizer with the animal figures used in the books, the racial/national groups they represent, and why Spiegelman might have chosen each animal to represent that racial/national group.

If time permits, students can research comic format in order to learn about the techniques and vocabulary necessary to better understand and discuss the comic artist's work. A knowledge of words like "panel," "frame," "gutter," "balloon," and "bleed," will give students a common vocabulary of graphic illustration technique. Considerable information on the technique of comic art can be found at the web site of the National Association of Comics Art Educators (http://teachingcomics.org). At this site, "The Creation of a Page Tutorial and Guide" by Tom Hart is a good introduction to the process of creating comic panels.

Step 5: Culminating Activity

Individuals or groups can create their own story in graphic novel format. The story might be based on one of the themes used in *Maus.* Brainstorming, researching, prewriting activities, storyboarding, rough drafts, etc. as outlined in Tom Hart's web tutorial (listed above) should be employed to insure a carefully structured product.

Assessment: Assessment of a literature circle unit may be both formal and informal. The teacher's observation

of each student in discussion groups can be used as an informal assessment. Student journals, self-reflection, and performance on worksheets and projects provide more formal forms of assessment. I have included chapter-based discussion prompts in the appendix in order for the groups to stay focused and for those students who are having trouble reacting to a reading.

Lesson Three: Biography Writing

Students will be writing a biography on an elder in their family or one whose connection they greatly admire. The following specifications are merely suggestion, so be at liberty to adjust them according to your student population: five paragraphs, typewritten, minimum of two direct quotes from their interviewee.

Choose a family elder – Students will pick an elder who has led a very interesting life, but one they may know very little about. Students will be spending time with this person and have to write about them so they should pick an elder in their family who is interesting, one they admire. *Think about that person* – students are to write down questions they have about their interviewee: What did they do? How have they made an impact on our world today? What do they feel is the greatest invention in the past forty years? In what ways can a young adult be like them? *Gather information* – students should try and find as much information on their elder as they can. This includes artifacts such as letters, photographs, clothing, etc. *Take notes* – Students will record facts and information as they find them. They can write these on index cards or in a special notebook with all of your research. Find a photo – Students should include a photograph or artifact to be included with their written biography.

Oral

The biographies of people in our families are rich resources of information about the past. They are living witnesses to history. To preserve this history and honor their stories, interviewing family members about the events at particular time periods in their lives can be a transformative experience for a student. Through the oral biography, a student can learn more about the hopes, feelings, aspirations, disappointments, family histories, and personal experiences of the person being interviewed. Finally, when a student shares his interview, a larger picture of the person, time, and place in question emerges an understanding of a neighborhood, of a family, of a generation, of a decade, etc.

Objectives:
- listening to recording oral histories from *storycorp.org, tellingstories.org, doingoralhistory.org and watching a mock interview in class*

- recording and writing an oral history from a family member or community member.

- following the guidelines

- sharing the digitized interview with the class

Web resources: www.storycorp.org; www.doingoralhistory.org; www.tellingstories.org

Materials: Many cell phones, mp3 players, and cameras are equipped with a recording device. While the production value does not have to be great, students will have to have recording device to record their interviewee. During the interview process it important that students have composition book to take notes and a list of questions they will ask their interviewee.

Software: Audacity is the most prominent computer software available to transfer the recorded interview on to a computer. It is a free download and it is available for both Mac and PC computers. If the recording device does not have a USB sync, then you can record directly to a computer using the built-in microphone.

Introductory Activities:

1. Before the oral biography project begins I introduce students to the history, theory, and practice of oral storytelling as a form of history and biography. I think the best way for a class to understand the compelling nature of oral storytelling is to *listen to examples*. The above mentioned web resources offer a variety of excerpts from their archives. The more a student hears the specific nature of an interview, he begins to understand that the intention of the oral history is to identify a particular timeline or moment in the interviewee's life.
2. It is also important to *model the interviewing process*. I would choose a recognizable professional teacher, colleague to interview. Often a student will contextual a teacher only in a school environment, but this offers the chance for the student to experience the teacher as something beyond the school environment. Conduct the interview in front of a class with a recording device and questions prepared. I am not merely modeling the type of questions to ask, but I am modeling listening and note-taking skills as well.

Procedures for the student oral interview:

Step 1: Select the Interviewee

- Decide what period of history (the lifetime of a living person) the project will cover—childhood, early adulthood, a certain decade, a period in the history of a town, etc..
- List several people that would fit into the identified era.
- Narrow the choice to one or two. Contact the chosen person and, if necessary, have him sign a permission form to have the interview taped for a specific project, explaining the intention of the interview and how it will be used.

Step 2: Complete Pre-Interview Research

- Get as much information about the timeline, topic, and the person as possible (this information can from family members, library sources on the community.
- Prepare a general list of specific questions and topics. Use open-ended questions more than Yes/No questions to avoid getting very short answers.

Step 3: Practice

- Practice using your equipment so the technology during the interview will go smoothly.
- Practice an interview with a friend, family member, or classmate as a trial run. The interviewer should do less talking than the person being interviewed.
- Pack pens and paper in case technology fails.

Step 4: Conducting the Interview

- Select a quiet place to use for the interview (no TV, radios, barking dogs, etc.).
- Put the interviewee at ease because people are often nervous about being taped; they are afraid their memory may fail or that they will be boring.

- Ask one question at a time.
- Do not interrupt the interviewee.
- If the interviewee strays from the question, bring him/her back with a comment or question.
- If the interviewee gets tired or fidgety, you can close the interview and reschedule more time later if needed.

Step 5: Processing

- Digitize the oral interviews using Audacity software.
- If an interviewee has spoken on several topics of interest, edit those stories into short files of ninety seconds each.

Project Assessment:

- The interviewer will choose and interview one person who is pertinent to the topic covered.
- The interviewer produces written information obtained from family or public sources.
- The interview produces a list of possible questions and topics to be covered that are pertinent to the assignment.
- The interviewer returns with an audible tape of the interview, and/or notes taken during the interview.
- The interviewer produces a digitized oral biographical narrative based on the interview that contains correct statements and information.
- The interviewer shares the audio with the class.

Digital

The primary motivation for a student to create a digital story is for him to experience biography as an amalgamation of the written, oral, and visual. The guiding principles of the digital biography is based upon the seven elements of digital storytelling developed by Joe Lambert at the Center For Digital Storytelling. (10)

1. Point of View — What is the main point of the story and what is the perspective of the author?
2. Dramatic Question — A key question that keeps the viewer's attention and will be answered by the end of the story.
3. Emotional Content — Serious issues that come alive in a personal and powerful way and connects the story to the audience.
4. Clarity of Voice — A way to personalize the story to help the audience understand the context.
5. Meaningful audio — Music or other sounds that support and embellish the storyline.
6. Economy — Using just enough content to tell the story without overloading the viewer.
7. Pacing — The rhythm of the story and how slowly or quickly it progresses.

Tutorial: There are a variety of websites that offer a simplified way to create a digital biography. Many of these websites are very basic, and therefore are very limiting in terms of the depth of a project. Such sites might serve as a fine example and place for a student to experiment and play, but eventually a student will want to be more creative with his storytelling. Microsoft has a free downloadable tutorial of Movie Maker and Photo Story at www.microsoft.com/education/teachers/guides/digital_storytelling.aspx . The tutorials are easy to follow and either program is sufficient for a student to be creative with his digital biography. For the MAC platform, iphoto and imovie work well. There are a variety of tutorials available on the web. I also suggest investing in Final Cut Teachers Edition. Prices will vary and it is tremendous too to teach a student as it requires more skill and precision than any of the other programs.

Process: The process in preparing a digital story is very similar to WRITING and ORAL. The student will have to *decide upon an interviewee*. The student will maintain the same interviewee throughout the semester. If not, it is important that the same criteria be followed for choosing an interviewee: an elder, a family member or community member. It is also very important during this stage that the student gather as many artifact as possible from his interviewee. Artifacts can include photographs and letters but it can also include items that can photographed such as a car, a drinking glass, etc.. These artifacts will become the basis for the visual story. If it is appropriate, a student can also use a stock or downloaded images as well. The student must seek permission before using photographs which are on the internet. The student may use clips of the audio interview with his interviewee, but the majority of the digital story must be in his voice. Ambient sound such as music and sound effects may also be used so long as they do not detract from the theme of the story.

Assessment: It is often difficult to assess the work of a student on this type of project because he is being introduced to an entirely new concept. Technology glitches can also make things more difficult. The rubric I have created is based upon the seven elements, but can be modified as needed.

Portfolio

The student portfolio module is the culmination of a sustained inquiry of biography. It pieces together the various components of biography the student has studied and completed into a community presentation. Using the definition biography as the "container" that can hold the emotion of the biography, a student can share with the community his understanding of *Maus*; the process of creating questions connected to the time-line of his interviewee; the experience of interviewing his subject; his recorded and visual biographies. In choosing carefully a person for a biography they care deeply about and having a stage to present this person and the work, students gain a sense of their own power as learners, historians, and most importantly a biographers.

Objectives:

- a student establishes a collection of work he has completed over the course of the unit.
- school and community members are invited to the portfolio presentation.
- students follow the rubric criteria and show several revisions of their work.
- school and community members look carefully at the work and offer constructive feedback.

Assessment: *The Portfolio* is a style of assessment that is not to be graded. It is about fostering an intergenerational, reflective, and democratic community that is committed to the learning development of youth and has a vested interest in engendering stories of profound yet unsung lives.

Step 1: Public Presentation

After a student has edited their oral and digitized work into a final completed product, he presents a body of work from the unit that he feels showcases his level of understanding. The invited community members should include each interviewee, family members, a school administrator, departmental instructors, school personnel including secretaries and maintenance, and a district representative. This type of presentation is best suited for a block schedule of ninety minutes (if there are too many students in the class, I would vote on eight to ten students to present. It is important that these students know they are representative of the class). Make sure each student follows the checklist of criteria that needs to be included in the presentation. Each presentation should be longer than seven minutes, followed by a question and answer time.

Step 2: Portfolio Roundtable

Students will have collected a variety of artifacts to help them reflect on the life of their interviewee. These artifacts may include journal entries, photographs, and letters. Over the course of the unit students have also collected a variety of records which have helped them reflect on their own intellectual and artistic growth such as storyboards, interview questions, revised write-ups, and digital rough-cut edits. Students publicly present this body of work at a roundtable style of assessment. The interviewee, family, school, and community members listen and view the work completed by the student. Following this, there is a question-and-answer session where a student has the opportunity to respond to community inquiry, present new perspectives, and introduce his subject.

Annotated Bibliography

Eisner, Will. *Graphic Storytelling and Visual Narrative*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2008. A great primer on the theory behind graphic novel. Eisner was a professor and pioneer in the field of combining storytelling with comic book style graphics.

Goodman, Steven. *Teaching Youth Media: A Critical Guide to Literacy, Video Production, & Social Change (Series on School Reform, 36)*. New York: Teachers College Press, 2003. An essential text for inner-city educators. Goodman's text addresses the need for districts to embrace technology as form of literacy. Well researched and engaging.

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Rollyson, Carl. *Biography: A User's Guide.* Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, Publisher, 2008.An entertaining and well organized text that covers the types of biographies and issues pertaining to the craft.

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Teehan, Kay. *Digital Storytelling: In and Out of the Classroom*. Raleigh: Lulu.com, 2006. A comprehensive overview of digital storytelling. The rubrics and websites resources are very helpful.

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Oral History and Digital Storytelling Web Resources

"Baylor University, Institute for Oral History, Introduction to Oral History." Baylor University, A Nationally Ranked Christian University, Undergraduate & Graduate Research Colleges Universities Schools in Texas. http://www.baylor.edu/oral_history/index.php?id=23566 (accessed July 22, 2010). Site provides in-depth information on interviewing techniques and ethical considerations regarding the interviews. This is important information to know as an educator.

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"Tips for Interviewing, Regional Oral History Office." The Bancroft Library. http://bancroft.berkeley.edu/ROHO/resources/rohotips.html (accessed July 22, 2010). Advice from Willa K. Baum, Oral History for the Local Historical Society UC Berkeley.

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"digital storytelling." Microsoft Corporation. http://microsoft.com/education/teachers/ (accessed July 22, 2010). Twenty-eight page tutorial using Movie Maker and Photo Story.Clearly written with great examples.

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Appendix

Oral Language

11.1 The student will make informative and persuasive presentations.

   a. Gather and organize evidence to support a position.
   b. Present evidence clearly and convincingly.
   c. Support and defend ideas in public forums.
   d. Use grammatically correct language, including vocabulary appropriate to the topic, audience, and purpose.

11.2 The student will analyze and evaluate informative and persuasive presentations.

   a. Critique the accuracy, relevance, and organization of evidence.

b. Critique the clarity and effectiveness of delivery.

Reading Analysis

11.3 The student will read and analyze relationships between literature, history, and culture.

a. Compare and contrast the development of various literary movements in its historical context.
b. Discuss literature as it reflects traditional and contemporary themes, motifs, universal characters, and genres.
c. Describe how use of context and language structures conveys an author's intent and viewpoint in contemporary and historical essays, speeches, and critical reviews.

11.4 The student will read and analyze a variety of informational materials.

a. Use information from texts to clarify or refine understanding of academic concepts.
b. Apply concepts and use vocabulary in informational and technical materials to complete a task.
c. Generalize ideas from selections to make predictions about other texts.
d. Analyze information from a text to draw conclusions.

Notes

- [1] Marans, Adelman *Children in a Violent Society*. 1 ed. New York: The Guilford Press, 1998, p. 220
- [2] Lee, *Biography: A Very Short Introduction*, 33
- [3] ibid. 34
- [4] ibid. 34
- [5] Goodman, *Teaching Youth Media*, 4
- [6] Raymond, E. (2000). Cognitive Characteristics. *Learners with Mild Disabilities* (pp. 169-201). Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon, A Pearson Education Company.
- [7] Hartman, H. (2002). Scaffolding & Cooperative Learning. *Human Learning and Instruction* (pp. 23-69). New York: City College of City University of New York.
- [8] Rose, Jacqueline. *THE HAUNTING OF SYLVIA PLATH.* 2nd ptg ed. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1992. P. 50
- [9] ibid. 58
- [10] Lambert, Joe. *Digital Storytelling: Capturing Lives, Creating Community*. 2 ed. Berkeley, CA: Life On The Water Inc, 2008.