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

Introduction

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That title – "Creating Lives" – indicates the double focus of our seminar. We were concerned on the one hand with creative people who consciously shaped (and in that sense created) their lives, and on the other hand with the way that biography shapes and gives meaning to the lives of its subjects. Our central question was: How does a life become a meaningful story, rather than a series of events? This is an ethical question about how people lead their lives, and a literary question about how narrative gives structure and value, pattern and purpose, to existence.

We kept both sides of the question in view as we learned about the modern history of biography in English, reflected on the methods and aims of this genre (one of the most popular kinds of writing), and dwelt on the moral and political issues it raises. We started with Samuel Johnson's essays on biography and his first experiment in the form, *The Life of Richard Savage,* went forward to Elizabeth Gaskell's *Life of Charlotte Bronte*, and then carried the topic to the twentieth century by considering controversial biographical subjects such as Virginia Woolf, Langston Hughes, and Sylvia Plath. For an overview of the form, we used Hermione Lee's exceptionally cogent and concise guide, *Biography: A Very Short Introduction*.

Our focus was on literary biography. But the ideal of a creative life is not an exclusively or even primarily literary one. It comes down to us from early biographies of heroes and the legends of saints, and it includes potentially people in every walk of life – politics, science, religion, education, military service, the arts. So the scope of seminar discussion, and of the curriculum units created in response to it, was very wide indeed.

In bookstores and classrooms, on television and the Web, autobiography is more prominent than biography (in the US; in the UK, less so). Biography, "the account of a person's life told by someone else" (as Hermione Lee defines it), is a related but different genre of "life writing," and it has distinctive strengths. An important assumption of our seminar was that we all can learn from lives distant and perhaps very different from our own. Biography challenges us to get outside of ourselves and the framework of our experience.

Yet biography persistently forces us to think about the relationship between the biographer and her or his subject (the examples of Johnson and Gaskell foreground this dimension of the genre), and the relationship that we have to them both as readers of biography. In this respect, learning about other people's lives through biography always involves learning about our own. Biography is both about others and our selves (and about the relationship between them).

Biography is provocatively contradictory in at least one other important sense. The form belongs to non-fiction. It is built out of facts, but the framing of those facts is a subjective process influenced by the biographer's bias or personal investment (of which he or she may not be aware), various social or historical

contingencies, and specifically literary questions of tone, narrative form, and argument. Biography is poised between literature and history, belonging to neither discipline exclusively.

For our seminar's final meeting, the Fellows became biographers and presented to the class short profiles of someone they knew personally or had learned about, using a variety of materials and methods. The moving discussion that we had of their diverse contributions made it clear that biography can stir powerful feeling in the biographer and raise complex ethical questions about how we relate – and relate to – the stories of other people's lives.

The curriculum units that follow suggest how flexible, suggestive, and just plain useful biography can be in the classroom, at all levels of public schooling and in a representatively wide range of school settings.

Biography might seem like too complex or advanced a literary form for use in first grade. But, as Holly Banning notes, first-grade curriculum often requires students to learn about exemplary figures from American history, and there are many biographies available for early readers. Drawing on memories of her own enthusiasm for biography as a young child, Banning outlines a plan for introducing beginning readers to biography, while also meeting the state mandate to teach them about specific figures in American history such as George Washington and George Washington Carver. She will bring her historical subjects close to her students by focusing on episodes from their childhood to which her students can relate, while foregrounding the same challenge (and opportunity) her students face – learning to read – by emphasizing the "literacy biographies" of her famous Americans.

Stephanie Johnson too is a first-grade teacher, and she has written a unit focused on three figures – Walt Disney, Helen Keller, and Dr. Seuss – of immediate interest to her students. Johnson will stress the creativity at the center of each of these three lives, and use it as a springboard for classroom activities that include drawing and animation, reading and writing (and with Dr. Seuss as a model, rhyming!), experiments in Braille, and creative use of online resources.

Biography lends itself, as Johnson's unit suggests, to experiments in various media. A life can never be reduced to a set of documents; to grasp it, we want pictures, moving images, objects, sound – media and materials that point beyond language to embodied experience. Deborah Monroy, in a classroom very different from Johnson's, also shows that biography lends itself to multi-modal learning and a holistic approach to knowledge. She will use the form as a way to deepen her advanced high-school students' engagement with French history and culture and reflect on their own lives in response to print and online resources, film, and the graphic novel (students will produce their own bande-dessiné biographies collaboratively). At the same time, she will urge students to see themselves as having biographies themselves, and able to shape their own lives.

That's a goal shared by every unit here, but it is especially emphasized in some. Edina Buzgon, for instance, who teaches business marketing to high school students, will use biography to introduce her students to the exemplary lives of successful entrepreneurs in the US and in their particular community, in the hope that they too will see themselves as engaged in the long-term project of creating successful careers in business. Barbara Prillaman has designed a curriculum unit that explores the life of Cesar Chavez in order to introduce biography to her Spanish-speaking students, and to provide a positive role model for them, which she will build on by asking them to go into their community and create biographical profiles of Hispanic leaders. Stacia Parker's unit will use the life of Barack Obama to suggest to her predominantly African American high school students their own potential to shape a life that refuses to conform to the reduced expectations for their futures that may come with life in an inner-city community. To have a biography is to have a life that is

actively chosen and unfolding over time, necessarily shaped, but not finally determined, by the social circumstances into which we are born.

While they too plan to use biography to enhance their students' sense of self-esteem and expand their view of their own prospects, Stephanie Brown-Bryant and Dean Whitbeck both highlight another ethical dimension entailed in the form. The focus in their differently designed units is on the obligation of the biographer: the demand on the biographer to be responsible to the facts and feelings of another person's life, and in that sense, to learn to relate to, and indeed to take care of, others. Brown-Bryant's unit is responding in particular to the ethical questions raised by young people's participation in online social networking and the effect on their imaginations of "reality" television. Whitbeck will use biography as a formal strategy by which his inner-city students can learn to shape and present in controlled and respectful ways the difficult and sometimes even traumatic stories of classmates, family members, and people from the surrounding community. Both of these units, Brown-Bryant's and Whitbeck's, will use peer-interviewing and digital technology.

Can a place have a biography? A town? A school? Yes, Mika Cade suggests, and her unit demonstrates how. Developing in rich ways the oral history techniques that other seminar Fellows will experiment with, Cade plans to have her students in the Bay Area town of Emeryville, California, learn about the history of their town by producing collaboratively a biography of their school. They will use school yearbooks in particular to study the changes and continuity in the school and its culture and in the surrounding community, and to identify and interview alumni about their experience. Students will become researchers and biographers, investigating the past as it reaches into the present moment in which they live.

Cade's English class highlights biography as a way to approach history, while Andrea Kulas, teaching AP English students in Chicago, is especially concerned with biography as a way to read literature. Having given her AP students an introduction to a variety of critical methods, or lenses, for reading literature, Kulas will add biography to this curriculum as a particularly accessible and "uniquely sensitive" interpretive tool. Her focus will be on teaching students to use biographical documents as evidence as they mount evidence-based arguments about Langston Hughes's poetry. At the same time, she will be teaching students to think about literature in historical context.

On the other side of the history/literature divide, Jeff Joyce's AP US history students will learn, as David McCullough suggests, the pleasure of the "great stories" as a way to enter into the lived complexity of history. The sheer scale of history makes it hard for students to approach. Biography is, in a sense, a form of micro-history: it makes large historical developments visible through the lens of one life story. But biography can itself be an unmanageably large form – think of the tomes devoted to a US President such as Lyndon B. Johnson. Joyce's practical answer to the problem of scale is to ask students to produce "Micro-Biographical Essays" (MBEs) of representative figures, focusing on a particular phase or event in the life as a way into larger historical structures.

Molly Myers, a history teacher who will team-teach a high-school course on women's history and literature with a colleague in English, has written a curriculum unit straddling both sides of the history/literature divide. Preparing students for a year-long biography assignment, in which they will research and write a biography of a woman whom they will interview, Myers has designed a "Biography Primer" centered on the fascinating case of Sylvia Plath. The "Primer" is intended to introduce students to the complexity and richness of biography as a form by investigating the controversies that surround Plath through exposure to biographical accounts of her life and work. They will learn to think about Plath in historical context, and to see how history takes shape in an individual life – in terms of the choices a particular woman makes, the constraints on those choices, and

the competing ways in which her life may be interpreted.

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