



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative

2011 Volume I: The Art of Reading People: Character, Expression, Interpretation

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## **The Other Side: Experiencing Cultures through the Eyes of My Students**

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### **Introduction**

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For teachers, it is not unusual to lesson plan during the summer months. This time is ideal for tweaking and reflecting on lessons from the previous school year. These changes and new techniques for the following school year are typically done with our student population in mind. This coming school year, I think I want to do something different. I typically start the first day of school by getting the students' home information and their school schedule. Once those tasks have been completed, I go into my speech about what geography is and how they will not only be learning about regions but also about different cultures within those regions. My usual speech is centered on explaining how I will expose them to other groups of people, other types of lands, foreign languages, regional dialects, the idea of cultural diffusions, and how we impact the land and are impacted by it.

This unit will address how my students define their culture and why they choose to group themselves based upon their culture. The unit will also address how they perceive foreign culture. By studying other cultures, I will attempt to debunk misconceptions about what my students perceive as different. Finally, the unit will tackle how those differences have allowed them to segregate themselves within their own communities. I will mainly focus on regions within the United States and by the end of this unit, students will be able to be aware of their prejudices and they will confront the origin of their intolerances. The leading question within the unit will be how can I expose my learners to other cultures within their communities and within the United States? Other questions that will be addressed include: How can I awaken my students' subconscious prejudices in order to make them conscious and how can they confront them to overcome those prejudices, if possible? And finally, are sheltered learners more susceptible to accepting messages received from different media sources without questioning the integrity of the source?

## Rationale

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When teaching geography, it is important for students to be open-minded to understanding others and their cultures, but I also understand that this is a tall task. So instead of forcing the issue, I want to understand my students' prejudices and biases and in turn, make them aware of their conscious and subconscious thoughts as well as their reactions to them. I am motivated by the need not to change my learners, but rather to make them aware of their opinions. When I was younger, I was able to be exposed to worlds outside of my neighborhood. Whether this world came in the form of a Cuban restaurant, learning a new language, visiting a foreign country, having pen pals from other countries, or reading a book about another family who practices a different religion, I could escape my reality and allow my mind to become swallowed up in things that were new and foreign to me. As a result of that exposure, I was able to be more accepting of things dissimilar to my culture.

### Culture and Cultural Geography

There are many fields of geography, but the main field of geography that will be researched is cultural geography. To better understand what cultural geography is, it is helpful to make sense of the word culture. J.A. Banks purports that

Most social scientists today view culture as consisting primarily of the symbolic, ideational, and intangible aspects of human societies. The essence of a culture is not its artifacts, tools, or other tangible cultural elements but how the members of the group interpret, use, and perceive them. It is the values, symbols, interpretations, and perspectives that distinguish one people from another in modernized societies; it is not material objects and other tangible aspects of human societies. People within a culture usually interpret the meaning of symbols, artifacts, and behaviors in the same or in similar ways. <sup>1</sup>

According to Banks, my students subscribe to the same culture because their values and what they deem as important are the same. To this end, when I examine the aspects of cultural geography, Dr. Kathryn Davis, professor at San Jose State, puts forward that cultural geography is "how people understand places, regions, and spatial relationships and how distance and connectivity impact human lives and relationships." <sup>2</sup> The culture that I encounter at my school can be described as different groups of students sectioning themselves off according to their neighborhoods because they share similar experiences and have similar values. Dr. Davis' position on how people can understand places and spatial relationships is evident everyday at my school. There can be times when students sit at their desks according to their neighborhoods because they have a deep affinity for it and those from their communities. Dr. Davis also puts forward that distance and connectivity can impact how humans behave. My learners compartmentalize themselves according to their neighborhoods and appear to have developed a sense of pride and identity by doing just that. This act can also be seen as threatening to those from surrounding communities which leads to hostilities within the school building.

The hostilities within the school contribute to the school's culture. C. Wagner conceptualizes school culture as "shared experiences both in school and out of school (traditions and celebrations), a sense of community, of family and team." <sup>3</sup> My students' understandings of their identities are linked to their neighborhoods. The act of them bringing their outside identities into the school contributes to the school's culture. Although these acts

are celebrated in some instances, it is also detrimental to conducting a safe learning environment and prevents new insights and experiences.

The aspect of cultural geography involving distance and connectivity and how they impact human lives, relationships, and interactions will be the driving force of this unit. I will choose to flesh out why my learners are satisfied with not exploring things that are foreign to them and how these viewpoints have hindered their development. The distance they choose to put between them and things that are unfamiliar to them could have evolved from how they identify themselves according to their neighborhoods. These acts have created stumbling blocks when I teach geography.

### **Studying cultures**

The idea of my students studying both their own cultural geography and that of others will prove to be beneficial for them as they try to understand the broader concepts of geography. My learners will understand how they have defined their culture and how these definitions have worked in a larger context. I want my students to be exposed to the many cultures within their own communities and within the United States. Their ability to have barriers against other cultures is partly due to how some sections of the city of Richmond are still segregated. Once these historical implications are addressed, they can take in how cultures have similarities and not be as hostile to things that are foreign to them.

## **Background**

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Richmond, Virginia is divided by the James River. The James River divides Richmond into two main sections: North of the James and South of the James. (See Appendix A) The neighborhoods that feed into George Wythe High School are those that are south of the James. These neighborhoods are off of six main streets: Hull Street, Commerce Road, Jefferson Davis Highway, Midlothian Turnpike, Broad Rock Boulevard, and Hopkins Road. These streets house the majority of my students. One of the main communities that a lot of my students come from is the Hillside Court housing complex. This community is off of Bellemeade Avenue which is off of Jefferson Davis Avenue. According to a crime index, from May 18, to June 29, 2011 there were seven assaults, two arrests, one burglary, and "other" crimes that were coded as suspicious activity. According to NBC Channel 12 News, which is Richmond's local news station, a man and his teenage daughter were shot April 15, 2011, and about two months earlier, a woman was found dead because she was caught in crossfire. <sup>4</sup> Since then, the local police station has increased their presence within the Hillside Court community. There are other housing communities that surround Hillside Court that share almost the same statistics for criminal activity as well. These communities feed into Wythe High School. <sup>5</sup>

### **Identification with Neighborhoods**

Some of the neighborhoods or streets that my students identify themselves with are the following:

- David's Garden housing community, which is also known as "across the tracks." This community is located off of Jefferson Davis Highway.
- Hillside Court housing complex is located off of Commerce Road.

- Broad Rock Boulevard
- 34<sup>th</sup> Street
- Blackwell housing community which is located off of Jefferson Davis Avenue.
- Midlothian Village housing community, which is also known as "the ville." This housing community is located directly across from George Wythe High.

All of these communities are located south of the James River.

## Demographics

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I am approaching my third year of teaching. I have taught World Geography and World History II for the past two years. The majority of the population that I teach is freshmen and sophomores. As reported on the Virginia Department of Education's website, for the academic school year of 2010-2011, Wythe's school population was 984 students. <sup>6</sup> Of those students, there were 287 freshmen and 231 sophomores. <sup>7</sup> I taught approximately 155 freshmen and 30 sophomores. It is my responsibility to get the freshmen prepared to take Virginia's geography state assessment. Most state assessed classes are seen as difficult for learners but geography is especially difficult as some of Richmond Public School's high schools have done away with the class. Last year, I collaborated with another social science teacher to accommodate exceptional education learners within the classroom. A large percentage of Wythe's student population receives an individualized education plan (IEP) by which those students have special accommodations that must be met within their learning environment. It is not uncommon to have collaborative teaching teams within the classrooms of Wythe as more than half of the school's population has an IEP.

### Sources used

The sources used in this unit will attempt to answer my questions that I have posed in the layout of the curriculum. I have included visuals, fictional, and nonfictional works to assist me during instruction. Some research has proven that students are stimulated by pictures and the use of video as these sources appeal to their emotions more. To this end, I have included some films and picture books. It is my belief that these sources will capture my students' attention and will force the issue of questioning their identities and the identities of others.

### Films

There will be no full length films assigned for this unit. Instead, I will use excerpts from films and utilize a variety of strategies listed in the next section to highlight their main points.

*The Public Housing Dilemma: Richmond, Va.*

I am choosing to open my unit with a brief documentary about the evolution of housing projects in Richmond, Virginia. The documentary explores the history of housing projects and also lays out the effects of having housing projects. One of the effects is how the offspring of older generations have adopted a mentality of not

wanting to move from Richmond and their communities. I want my learners to think about the negatives of not exploring worlds outside their communities. This video suggests how manmade borders around these neighbors have created mental boundaries for learning about other cultures. Although there is value in appreciating one's culture, there is also a struggle to learn about others.

### *A Day at Hillside*

This is a quick documentary of the halls of George Wythe High that depicts how students communicate, whether orally or through verbal cues. The message from this title purports that students have sectioned themselves off according to their housing project while being inside of George Wythe High. Instead of the title of the film being called "A Day at George Wythe" it is instead called "A Day at Hillside," which highlights how students see the school as an extension of their community. This speaks to my student's perception of themselves and how they see themselves representing their communities at school. As mentioned before, C. Wagner conceptualized that outside influences can contribute to a school's culture. <sup>8</sup> With this in mind, if every neighborhood or street did a film, it will speak to how culture and identity are important themes in the lives of the learners. It is also evident from this film that their ways of communicating are linked to their specific housing project. For example, only students from Hillside Court can say certain words and use specific hand gestures when greeting one another. I want to show this film to my students and make correlations to how other cultures outside of their communities do the same things. Cultures within and outside of Virginia preserve their identity by having norms and practices unique to them. If I make a connection to things outside of their reality, it can broaden their sense of awareness and they can then see similarities.

### *Goodwill Hunting*

This film has two main characters who are at their construction job and the one friend tells the other one that if he is still living in South Boston, Va. in ten years he will have let everyone down because he has the potential to be more. This scene paints a vivid message of taking advantage of opportunities and not resting on what is comfortable in life.

## **Texts**

There will be no full length text assigned for this unit. Instead, I will use excerpts from a variety of books and utilize a variety of strategies listed in the next section to highlight purposeful segments.

### *The House on Mango Street*

Sandra Cisneros, author of *The House on Mango Street*, presents this novel in a series of vignettes, rather than a structured novel. Eleven year old Esperanza Cordero lives in Chicago and hopes to one day become a writer. She has come to realize that assimilation is the key to success and vividly depicts joys and ills of her community; however she also comes to understand that she is limited by her Chicana culture and its low expectations for girls and women. The reader is left to wonder how Esperanza will ever leave Mango Street to pursue her dreams as a writer when her opportunities as an impoverished and Latina woman seem so limited. I do have a rising Hispanic population and I am choosing this book to be culturally inclusive. My desire is for the Hispanic learners to see themselves in the main character so that they can have the desire to follow their dreams.

### *Monster*

*Monster* is set in Harlem, New York and focuses on sixteen year old Steve Harmon who is accused of serving as a lookout for a robbery and murder which takes place at a local drugstore. As an aspiring filmmaker, Steve serves as the narrator of the novel *Monster*, writing the novel in the style of a screenplay. The reader struggles with a range of emotions as Steve tries to present himself as someone who isn't a "monster", as he is characterized by the prosecutor, but rather a boy who was simply at the wrong place at the wrong time. *Monster* forces the reader to examine who they are and how they are perceived by others. This is an excellent source for my learners because it allows them to see how others could assign particular attributes to their culture only based on race. Are my students upholding those perceived messages from the book? Do my students want to support the message or try to offer other attributes of their culture? This novel could act as call for action on my student's part.

### *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*

*The Watsons Go to Birmingham-1963* is set in Flint, Michigan during the height of the American Civil Rights movement. The Watsons left Birmingham to escape segregation and their children have no sense of what it is like to live in a segregated society. At school, they are called the "Weird Watsons" because their parents are from Alabama. The children in the family, Byron, Curtis, and Joetta are sent to the South for the summer after Byron Watson constantly gets into trouble and his actions finally push his mother too far. Fed up, his parents decide that they will send their children to the Deep South for the summer to spend time with their Grandmother in an effort to get Byron away from his gang. During their journey, their mother makes preparations to re-enter the segregated south and the children are in for a racially charged adventure along the way. This piece will force learners to become more aware of their own culture. The experiences of the children allow them to appreciate the sacrifices of their families which in turn, can provide a springboard into a change of behavior. This can aid as a mirror into their culture.

### **A Guide for using *The Watsons Go to Birmingham - 1963* in the Classroom**

This companion guide was designed for teachers to use when teaching *The Watsons Go to Birmingham*. Comprehension and discussion questions will be garnered from this text.

### *When I Was Young in the Mountains*

This short picture book does an excellent job describing life in the Appalachian Mountains. The illustrations show a picturesque view of the mountains, the weathered clothing of the school children, and how Grandpa works in the coal mines. My students may be able to draw some similarities with this family but also may enjoy noticing how different the lifestyle is from theirs. For example, the little girl had to awaken Grandmother late at night because she ate too much okra. But the twist is that Grandmother had to escort her to an outhouse. I am certain that my learners will laugh at the idea of using an outhouse, but they must realize that this is a reality for some. The author closes the book with,

When I was young in the mountains, I never wanted to go to the ocean, and I never wanted to go to the desert. I never wanted to go anywhere else in the world, for I was in the mountains. And that was always enough for me. <sup>9</sup>

This quote will certainly generate one main question from my learners, "Why would she want to stay in the mountains?" Since this is a legitimate question, I can then ask them, "Why don't you want to leave the south side of Richmond?" This book could make it important for my students to expose themselves to other worlds other than their realities. Because the little girl is proud of her home, as my students can relate to, it does not

mean her home must be her only exposure.

## Poems

I am choosing to spend the first couple of days of school getting to know my learners. I am choosing to do "Where I'm From" poems to get a glimpse into their realities. In my experience of doing a "Where I'm From" poem, I was painting a picture of my reality, providing images, and conveying messages of what is important to me. It is my hope that my students will do the same. After writing the poems, I want to use them as art work that will cover the walls of the classroom. I want my students to realize the similarities that they have with their peers and celebrate their differences. As I do understand that making those connections will be an on-going task, we can revisit them and write new poems at the end of the school year. I am hoping to see growth and more of an awareness of where they are from on a larger scale. According to George Ella Lyon, who authored "Where I'm From," his inspiration to writing the poem was to "know when you get to be from a place that doesn't have roots like trees."<sup>10</sup> This is my inspiration for my students. I want them to see themselves not only in their families and in their communities, but also in other places than south of the James River.

### *Here in Harlem*

This book is a collection of poems in many voices written by Walter Dean Myers. The author celebrates the voices and aspirations of the residents of Harlem. There are three poems in particular that I choose to use so that my learners can compare and contrast cultures.

#### *"Macon R. Allen, 39"*

This poem embodies all there is to experience in the "black church." For many of my students, they attend church every Sunday because they were reared in the church. Myers takes on the voice of Deacon who paints a wonderful image of what the "black church" experience is like. One of the recurring messages throughout the poem is, "Oh, Lord, I love a shouting church!" On many occasions, my students speak about and imitate their Sunday church experiences in school. If I present this poem to my students, I want them to draw an immediate parallel to the "black church" experience as they should see themselves and perhaps their family members' voices and identity in the poem.

#### *"C. C. Castell, 49"*

This poem is written from the voice of a person who is on disability. Castell goes on to describe everything he sees while sitting on his porch stoop. The main thing that is observed is how "the young peoples is in a hurry."<sup>11</sup> According to Castell, the young people are hurrying to complete whatever task that must be done for the day. The young people believe there is something important to be done so there is a sense of urgency to complete it and Castell calls this urgency "progress." The messages from the poem are clear. Since Castell is disabled, he is not able to be a part of the "progress" that is described in the poem. He can only participate by watching from his stoop. Castell is reflective in his approach while watching the young people and I want my students to do the same. I do not want my learners to not progress in life because of their prejudices or slanted views. Instead, I want them to participate and not become disabled by their opinions or by things foreign to them. If they take stock in their thinking, they can potentially change their approach to learning about cultural geography.

### *Lois Smith, 12*



This poem is written from the voice of a student who wants a school to be named after her. Myers provides a picture of a five year as the backdrop in order to offer how this child aspires to be famous as do most kids. A lot of my learners want to be famous or accomplished in some respect. What I want to impress upon my students is fame comes with prices. There will be others who look up to them. "And young kids would want to grow up to be like me," is a line from the poem that I will turn into a question. Do you want other kids to be like you when you grow up? Will you be making any changes to your life in order to be a positive figure in the community? This line can begin a conversation about how it is important to see yourself in others so that we can celebrate our similarities while honoring our differences. In order to achieve this, my learners have to become more aware of other cultures.

## Objectives

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In my classroom, I am mandated by the Virginia Standards of Learning to teach my students how regions have been characterized by having regional labels and how cultural characteristics have linked and/or divided regions. I am also mandated to teach about 11 different regions but for this unit, I will mainly focus on the United States. Before my learners can appreciate the cultures of other regions, I want them to first learn how to enjoy what is in their backyards. And finally, my learners will be able to interpret the past, understand the present, and plan for the future by honing their skill sets to analyze problems and to make decisions about their communities and others. I firmly believe that disengaged citizens are often marginalized. Therefore, I find that it is essential that they can connect to the material studied not as a silent observer but as an advocate for change. This will become evident as they monitor their reactions towards things that are foreign to them. If my students were to become more accepting or if they committed themselves to at least acknowledging their prejudices, teaching about new regions would not be a strenuous act. I want my learners to preserve their new ideas by teaching others in their communities.

## Strategies

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Many of my learners have difficulty reading. So that I can accommodate those learners, I will scaffold their learning by using a number of graphic organizers. So that I can reach the visual and auditory learners, I will provide material that will be read aloud and short movie clips. Among the strategies that will be used in my unit are as follows:

### Venn-Diagrams

These diagrams will aid in understanding the immediate differences and similarities between two or more cultures. At the onset of each lesson, I will present a Venn-diagram comparing their culture to a new culture. The diagram will serve as introducing a new region. As the students complete the diagram, I am interested in uncovering their prejudices or maybe even their resistance to learn about the culture. If this occurs, I will have already completed a Venn-diagram that highlights the similarities between their culture and the new culture. By doing this, it should ease their anxieties.



## **KWL Charts**

These charts will be used to tap into the learner's mind about what they KNOW (K) about the culture, what they WANT to know (W) about it and what they have LEARNED (L) as we finish the lesson. I am interested in all parts of the chart because typically I will uncover their prejudices in the (K) column, their curiosities(W), if any, in the middle column, and what they have learned (L) in the last column. As the unit progresses to other cultures, I am hoping to see the middle column (W) become lengthier because this will show evidence of them wanting to quench their curiosities and desiring to become more aware of things foreign to them. The first column can be used as the student's pre-assessment (K) as the last column (L) can be used as the student's post assessment.

## **Cooperative/Collaborative Learning Groups**

As the school year progresses, I will place students in cooperative learning groups. There are many benefits to high school students being able to effectively communicate with one another but I am going to intentionally mix the groups according to neighborhoods. As the students complete activities each group member will be assigned a different task to complete. This type of group learning is termed the round – robin – brainstorming.

- The class is divided into small groups (4 to 6) with one person appointed as the recorder.
- A question or dilemma is presented and students are given time to think about answers.
- After the "think time," members of the team share responses with one another round robin style.
- The recorder writes down the answers of the group members.
- The person next to the recorder starts to record for the next questions and the cycle begins again although with a different recorder each time. <sup>12</sup>

Aside from the immediate positive effects of having collaborative learning groups (enhancing student satisfaction with their learning experiences, helping students develop skills in oral communication, promoting student self-esteem, and promoting student learning and academic achievement) I am extremely interested in helping to promote positive student relations. Since these groups will be mixed without attention to neighborhoods, my learners will gain from each other's efforts and their experiences. They will recognize that all group members share a common fate and jointly celebrate when a group member is recognized for achievement.

## **Mini-Lessons (Classroom Activities)**

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### **Day 1- "Where I'm From" by George Ella Lyon**

The first day of class will be spent reading this poem. I plan to read the poem aloud to my students instead of them having to read it to themselves. After reading it, I want to analyze each stanza as some stanzas appeal to our senses and others bring us to pause. I want to pull out symbolisms and details that may be personal to the author. I definitely want to allow a time for questions and comments as I am sure some students may not

understand some inferences or concepts that were developed. Now, I want students to write their own "Where I'm From" poems. After they finish writing them, I will volunteer to share my poem first. I will project my poem for all to see so that after I read it, I can begin to tell a bit about my life. As I share, I will pose the questions,

- Can anyone relate to my poem?
- Who has been through something similar?
- Is this different from you?
- If so, how or how not?

I want to show the class how I can be vulnerable because I am sure that others will hesitate to share their poems. As students share their poems, I will pose those same questions to highlight the differences and similarities among us.

## **Day 2 - A Day at Hillside**

This day will be spent dividing my students into small cooperative learning groups. As they are in their groups, I will show the short film, *A Day at Hillside*. This film should be familiar to them as it is about one of the neighborhoods that feed into the school. By showing this film, I want to get their immediate reactions to the film and have them answer the following questions.

- Do you approve of the film?
- Does the film accurately depict the Hillside Court community? How or how isn't it?
- What are the positives from the film?
- What are the negatives?
- What messages does the film send?
- How should others feel about the film?
- Do you relate to the film? How or how not?

These questions should get at the specifics about my student's cultural geography. Since some students in the group will not be from the Hillside Court community, they can offer a different view to the film by answering the same questions. This can show how closed minded or open minded their peer group is to learning about foreign things. In future lessons, I can refer to this lesson if I feel my students are being closed minded to other cultures. I can simply ask,

- "How did it make you feel when no one wanted to learn about your culture?"
- Was it fair to you?
- How did you convince them to learn about it?
- Was it worth it?

## Day 3 - Gullah Island

I will show a snippet of "Gullah Gullah Island" which is a kid's show. The Gullah people are a distinctive group of Black Americans from South Carolina and Georgia in southeastern United States. They live in small farming and fishing communities along the Atlantic coastal plain and on the chain of Sea Islands which runs parallel to the coast. This show is presented in a way that shows how these people preserve and honor their culture by sharing it. Whether the Gullah people invite people on the island or tell historical narratives about their ancestors, this kid's program is entertaining and informative. After watching a few minutes of the episode, I will pose the following questions,

- How do the Gullah people preserve their culture?
- How do they share their culture?
- Can you think of another culture in the U.S. that shares the same qualities as the Gullah people?

After completing this assignment, students will develop a theme song for their culture. They will listen to the cartoon's theme song of "Gullah Gullah Island" <sup>13</sup> and try to embody some of the same characteristics of the song. This assignment should show how cultures preserve, share, and honor their history through music, art, and dance.

## Teacher Resources

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## Appendix A

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## Endnotes

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