



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative

2012 Volume II: Storytelling: Fictional Narratives, Imaginary People, and the Reader's Real Life

The Truth about Lies: Recognizing Lies, Stereotypes, and Prejudice through Memoir Reading and Writing

Curriculum Unit 12.02.05, published September 2012

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Introduction

Liar.

The word is not capitalized simply because it is the first word in the sentence. And, yes, Liar *is* a complete sentence since it holds a position in many parts of speech. It is, for example, capitalized because it should be thought of as a proper noun - a nom de plume, standing in place of all of our names. No one wants to touch Liar. It's a leper - contagious and catastrophically hazardous to one's health. It stands isolated while hissing out its venomous deception. It is a noun formed from a verb. It slithers and coils around you, either silencing you or swallowing you whole and making you a part of it. And, if you've ever been on the receiving end of a lie then you understand that the word is also an expletive, totally deserving of its 'four-letter word' status.

When a person makes the claim, "I do not prejudge!" that person is lying. We all prejudge; therefore, we all lie. Prejudging is a survival instinct, but left unchecked, prejudging can lead to our demise. Stereotyping is at the root of prejudice. Stereotyping is the lack of respect for individualized truths. It is a well-masked lie. We make assumptions about the character of another person. We feign superiority. Teachers are routinely guilty of this and we pass it all on to our students. I confess; I, too, am guilty.

It is often difficult to tell the truth, especially for children. In an effort to lead by example and to curtail the perpetuation of my own failings as a teller of non-truths, I have set out to create a unit of study that will allow both my students and me to examine the origins of a habituation of lying that perpetuates stereotypes. Particularly, this unit makes use of the memoir genre to help students to bridge the gulf of imposed stereotypical notions that lead us all to live as liars. No holds barred. No holding back. This unit requires the teacher to limit the amount of answer giving and, instead, to increase the amount of time spent helping students to dig deeply within their own experiences to arrive at their own questions and their own truths.

Context

This unit has been designed for middle-level gifted students within the Humanities Department of the Pittsburgh Public Schools gifted education program. The students, though grouped by perceived intellectual strength, have a wide array of gifts and talents. They need academic strength and/or interest-based enrichment and, at times, acceleration to satisfy the curiosity of ever-wondering minds. They are not, contrary to popular assumption, 'all good students', nor do they all 'instinctively know everything'. They are also not capable of 'getting it all right on the first try'. They *really* like to ask questions. A lot of questions. And though most cherish their intellects, they struggle with the oft-negative reactions that others have to their unique perspectives. Thus, each teacher writes course material suited to the students' specific academic needs and interests. Students select courses similarly to choosing college electives. Thought-provoking units seem to be the most popular.

Good writers write about what they know. So what do my students 'know'? Smart means nerdy; nerdy means uncool. Black means troubled; trouble equals failure. Females need a male; males are the boss. Guess what happens if the student is a smart Black female who has no interest in boys. Grab a life raft! She's drowning in what these kids 'know.' So here sits the quandary: How do I help them unlearn these things without telling them how to think? My students are in the top tier of intellectual functioning and score well on the 'comprehension' section of standardized tests, but they have very limited world views due to limited exposure to cultures other than their own. Most don't tie the analysis of text back to themselves. They do not question their role as readers or the role of writers. Most of them do, however, subscribe to my philosophy that great intellect is tethered to great responsibility. They are tough, but malleable. They are seekers of deeper understanding. Many have already chosen to take my course on Social Justice Debates, which, like this unit, was created because it is both my moral and professional obligation to guide them to become capable leaders. Socially responsible education is a key to creating such leaders. By helping the students to uncover the stereotypes that they hold or have experienced, the students can release themselves from such bias. That release will enable them to empathize without the danger of being absorbed into someone else's truth.

All units created for my program must be reflective of our gifted model of education which places emphasis on cross-curricular, project-based learning. It is my job to make the students aware that how they work toward and through a production is as important as the product itself. The process goals for this course are higher-level thinking, creative thinking, interactive communication, and self-directed learning. These are appropriate skills for gifted learners and connect well to the process of writing. Many of my students deal with issues stemming from perfectionism. They want everything to be perfect the first time, so most are not too excited about the revision process. Writing is not created the moment a pen scratches words onto a paper; it is the revision process by which the author emerges victorious. The students must be made aware that what they produce is as important as how they work toward and through the production.

Rationale

The rationale for creating a unit that combines memoir writing with an exploration of lies, stereotypes, and prejudice came surely, but not swiftly. Perhaps I am slow on the uptake, but I seemed to fail to see the blinking neon signs – they read "Tell the truth!" For instance, I recall a time when, after reprimanding an African American male student for talking while I was giving instruction, the student huffed, "You don't like me because I am Black." Did I question where his notion had risen? Tell him that I actively take African dance lessons because I honor the opportunity to be a part of something other than my own culture? Lay down a portion of the things I have chosen to study about the rich oral-storytelling tradition or artistic production of African Americans? Nope. I would be lying if I wrote that I had said any of those things. Instead, I rolled my eyes and snapped my lips closed faster than a clam retaining its claim to a prize pearl.

During another mind-opening moment, I came across a child's social media post regarding a teacher's refusal to answer a question posed by a class member. It was a question about the origin of racism. The student apparently was told that her question was off-topic. The student felt otherwise. The post read something like, "Ugh. Teachers...they don't allow us to ask questions, but all they do is ask. How do they expect us to learn?"

I was struck by the profound nature of this child's statement and it led me to question my own teaching practice. I could not lie to myself; I was guilty of questioning more than I allowed students to question. This led me to believe that I was indeed a *Liar*? I was presenting myself as superior to the students by stifling the student-generated questioning process. I arrived at the notion that I did so because I was afraid that they would ask questions that I could not answer. I am older: Does that not mean that I should be wiser? I was establishing a classroom climate of 'us' versus 'them.' Is this the same bias that led the aforementioned student to believe that the teacher has an answer to her question? To *all* of her questions? Can you see the stereotype hidden here? Age is not a requirement of maturity, yet both student and teacher made an assumption to the contrary. That is a stereotype that I will categorize as age and/or status related.

I had long fallen prey to the sinister little snake of lies that led me, like many other educators, into thinking that discussions about race are taboo. *Why*? What about sex, gender identity, religion, body type, parental financial status, family configuration, disability, neighborhood, and social status? A silencing finger seems placed upon those lips as well. I tried to pin-point moments when this habit might have originated for me. Slowly, like a sleeping foot to which feeling begins to return, those pin-points became too numerous to tolerate. I began to toy with the idea of using memoir writing to help the students. As all educators should, I began to do what I was planning to ask my students to do. I utilized the *Memoir Pre-write Organizer* (See **Appendices**) and, in my own memoir, attempted to utilize the elements of craft that I expect my students to learn; audience appropriateness, memoir structure, voice, tone, dialog construction, use of active verbs, and figurative language. Here, my first try at crafting such a memoir illustrates the connection to lies, prejudice, and stereotypes that I remember being fed as a child:

- "Damned Questions"
- What does a 12-year-old know? Who has the right to decide what a kid *should* know? I've always asked a lot of questions. I recall being prepared for my Confirmation, a Catholic rite of passage in which an adolescent verbally 'chooses' to accept Christ in front of the Church. A precocious but naïve child, I had been reading Herman Hesse's *Siddhartha*. I poked my pink hand into the air, "Does reincarnation hurt?"
- Silence. More silence. A great deal of squirming.
- The priest glared, his red eyes forming into razor-sharp slits. "There is no reincarnation in Catholicism!"

- "But the Bible clearly says that Jesus rose from the dead. And that was a mighty big rock to roll away," I replied in the cheeky tone that, to this day, I never managed to shake. My friends giggled. Some rolled their eyes. I didn't know why.
- "You blasphemous harlot!" he raged, spitting like a clogged faucet.
- In that moment I learned children should be seen, but not heard. To this very day I am grateful that none of us actually knew those terms.
- I was thrown out of class merely for asking a question and scourged as an insolent child. I narrowed my eyes and bit hard on my tongue. I was, evidently, supposed to bow to his will and eat the host of his narrow-mindedness. He represented patriarchal morality. I thought his collar simply must be too tight. He did also once tell my mother that being divorced meant she could not accept Communion. My kind, beautiful mother was not good enough for God. Huh? The synonym for *priest* hissed in my ears. Go ahead and call her, *Father*. My God loves my mother. And me.
- I wonder now if he would have imposed the same restriction upon my dad. Mom would certainly be licked by the flames of hell. The apple did not fall far from the tree. A questionable damning brought by way of a damn question.
- After drafting this memory, I began to think about the limitless ways that people can be stereotyped and the impact that it has on student-student, teacher-student, and student-society relationships, but I was still stymied as to how to even broach the issue. How do I tie this all together? How do I model this process without imposing *my* will? As I do during any time of personal bewilderment, I turned to literature to help me de-stress. I began *Kite Runner*. Amir, the narrator and main character, takes a moral journey saddled with racial stereotype. In a poignant moment in the text, he is told by his father that there is no other sin than theft. Lying, the father reveals, is theft of the truth. ¹ The entire book is predicated on lying; Amir and Baba are tormented by culturally-charged lies of omission. ²

Then it hit me.

Use literature to segue into discussing lies, stereotype, and prejudice as well as a model for writing! By using student-appropriate selections that show how brave a writer must be to write about such concepts, the reader can be guided to deconstruct craft choices made by the writer, thus enabling the young reader to become a writer capable of constructing his or her own memoir. The students need to be led through a series of readings that allow them both to discuss lies, stereotype, and prejudice, and to identify and mimic craft choices within their own writing. For this purpose, I have selected fiction and memoirs that dramatize elements of lies, stereotypes, and prejudice. They include: *Smoky Nights* by Eve Bunting, Isaiah Washington's memoir in Etan Thomas' *Fatherhood*, Sharon Olds' poem "On the Subway", Harriet McBryde Johnson's *Too Late to Die Young: Nearly True Tales from a Life*, Richard Wright's *Black Boy*, and Marjane Satrapi's graphic novel *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*.

Objectives

By the end of this unit the students will be able to explain the characteristics of memoir; define lies, stereotype, and prejudice as they pertain to creative writing; identify and discuss common stereotypes and how stereotypes originate; connect these concepts to the notion of 'lies'; use the higher-level thinking model to analyze professionally written memoirs; synthesize components of craft in original student-created

memoirs; evaluate each other's original memoir in an effective and efficient manner; and use the creative thinking model to create original writing pieces that reflect both gained knowledge of writing craft and recognition of stereotypes. The product completion expectation will be that each student produces at least two memoirs of at least three pages per memoir.

Preparation

No art form jumbles lies and truth more than creative writing. The elements of fiction exist within the memoir genre, so it is important to define the similarities. John Gardner and Julius Lester refer to all literature as moral art.³ This implies that authors should be socially responsible, but how can students demonstrate social responsibility within their writing when their lives are crowded with lies, stereotypes, and prejudice? The thin line between fiction, lies, and stereotype is described below. Specific information about the genre of memoir is also given.

What Is the Connection between Fiction, Lies, and Stereotype?

Fiction and the act or *art* of lying connect in many ways. Both are misleading. Fiction includes falsehoods. The reader often has expectations that the writer may not or cannot reach. The reader brings experience, or the lack of it, into the text. In painting a false reality, however, the writer can cause the reader to uncover greater truths. It is through imagination, a soft-coated synonym for lying, that a reader and writer can use false reality to turn a lie into truth. In fiction, for example, a talking animal can teach a child valuable life lessons; a poorly-raised child can teach an adult about intelligence; a robot can teach man about humanity.

In fiction, the first lie that readers are asked to accept is milieu. Milieu is the story's collective setting—both physical and emotional; inclusive of social climate. In fables, for example, readers are asked to believe in the existence of a little village where pigs can talk and where wolves can summon enough breath to blow down a house of straw. They are also asked, perhaps unconsciously, to believe the underpinnings of a lie? It is only acceptable not to harm the little pigs once they have improved their standard of living.

"Cinderella" is a tale done over in countless ways and in many cultures. Simply put, it is a tale about a beautiful step-child who is treated harshly by her unattractive step family. Magic, not will, helps her to shed her rags and dress her up in respectable garb. She is not the master of her own destiny. It is not until a wealthy, handsome prince chooses her that she is saved from her situation. She is objectified and placed on a princess pedestal⁴. In a 2006 *New York Times* article, journalist and mother Peggy Orienstein wrote, "'Princess,' as some Disney execs call it, is not only the fastest-growing brand the company has ever created; they say it is on its way to becoming the largest girls' franchise on the planet⁵." The gist of her tirade is this: consumerism creates a limiting 'princess' mold in which to raise girls⁶. And this all started with a little thing called fiction. If fiction is fattening up our children simply to be eaten⁷ by stereotypes, how can we possibly excuse ourselves from the responsibility of paying attention to writing as moral art⁸?

What Is Memoir and What Are the Important Elements of the Genre?

The word memoir is French in origin. It comes from *mémoire*, meaning memory ⁹. A memoir is a single recollection of an event that has shaped the writer's life in some way. The plural form, memoirs, is a thematic collection of events ¹⁰. Since a memoir recounts a direct relationship between an actual experience and what was learned from that experience, memoir, like autobiography, is most often written in first person narration. John Gardner suggested this narration type be used by all new writers ¹¹ regardless of the creative genre. First person narration makes the writer take responsibility for the voice within the text. It identifies him or her as taking ownership of what is written. Objectivity is dissolved. Unlike an autobiography, a memoir can be crafted from a specific moment in time or a connection among thematic events – it is not the span of one's entire life. Sequence is dictated by the specificity of details, not the passing of time.

Memoir is like autobiography in that both involve self-told tales of the writer's real life; however, memoir does not entail the entire life span of the writer. Memoir is more reflective, more personal and, at times, more toxic. Toxicity has multiple definitions. It is best described as the emotional texture that makes a writing selection appropriate or inappropriate for a particular audience. For example, an explicit tale of child abuse may be too toxic for an adolescent reader. Toxicity can undulate throughout a memoir or it can remain constant as it does in Richard Wright's *Black Boy*. Toxicity also relates to the emotional investment that a selection might solicit from the reader. Memoir can also lead a truthful writer toward an exploration of that which may be emotionally jarring for the writer him or herself. Writer Judith Barrington describes this biting situation:

As soon as I started to write about my own life, I understood that to speak honestly about family and community is to step way out of line, to risk accusations of betrayal, and to shoulder the burden of being the one who blows the whistle on the myths that families and communities create to protect themselves from painful truths. ¹²

Critics often argue that memoirs contain untruths – that the writer fudges many of the details. Pascal states that the failing of work in this genre "is an untruthfulness which arises from the desire to appear admirable." ¹³ Most writers claim to be truthful; however, relying on memory is tricky – it runs the risk of incorrectly remembering. As with fiction, the reader of memoir must allow his or herself to be absorbed in the milieu since what the writer remembers when creating a memoir may not be an objective truth. What the writer has gained through the experiences, however, can be of great value to readers. As Lisa Dale Norton notes, "[W]e can, by telling our individual truths in the most authentic way, touch the universal truths that can change us all." ¹⁴

The three essential components of a memoir are setting, situation, and a sharing of reaction and/or realization. The writer must establish the time, place, and climate?both physical and social. The writer should allow the reader to know the age or maturity level he or she was when the time the situation took place. When the writer addresses the situation, he or she should use concrete, specific details and elaborate without masking the truth. Along with the setting and situation, the writer should share his or her reaction as it relates to the setting and/or situation.

Stylistically, memoir can be formed in many different ways. The writer can follow the sequence directly. He or she can begin with the sharing of reaction. The writer can loop the story, weaving back and forth from then and now. Memoir can be done in many creative forms, such as a poem, a comic strip, or a series of letters or diary entries. In any form, the literary elements of fiction should be used in memoir. They help to enliven the senses of the reader, thus drawing them into the memoir by allowing them to see the writer's reality. Such

elements include the use of active verbs, varied sentence length, and literary devices.

What Evidence Suggests that Memoir Will Help Students to Deal with Lies, Prejudice, or Stereotypes?

Robert Coles spoke of his own relationship with literature as a learning tool: "[O]ne keeps learning by teaching fiction or poetry because every reader's response to a writer's call can have its own startling, suggestive power." ¹⁵ Reading helps one to grow. Memoir does this as well. It compels the writer to tell the truth as he or she understands it. It should be the most honest form of creative writing, which can also make it the most frightening to explore. It forces the writer to arrive at his or her own meaning. As Natalie Goldberg puts it, this form of writing has teeth. ¹⁶

Impressionable young readers and writers need guidance toward a deeper understanding of themselves and others in order to help them tell their truths. Many of my students ask how and why stereotypes develop. These are great questions, but certain questions are not for me to answer. By questioning myself, I have come to realize that the questions for which I do not have answers are those that need to be addressed in greater depth by the individual student. This notion of self-discovery is well documented by Richard Wright as he discussed his experiences with writing *Black Boy*:

I found that to tell the truth is the hardest thing on earth...you will find that at times sweat will break upon you. You will find that even if you succeed in discounting the attitudes of others to you and your life, you must wrestle with yourself most of all...for there will surge up in you a strong desire to alter facts, to dress up your feelings. You'll find that there are many things that you do not want to admit about yourself and others. As your record shapes itself an awed wonder haunts you. And yet there is no more exciting an adventure than trying to be honest in this way. The clean, strong feeling that sweeps you when you've done it makes you know that. ¹⁷

The quotation speaks to the cathartic nature of writing. Memoir can give all students a voice because memoir makes use of personal truth without censorship or apologies. Students can explore any facet of that which would otherwise exclude them.

Plans

The strategies below will allow the students to explore the development of a memoir through self-reflection, reading, writing, responding, revising, and publication. The included strategies are for helping students uncover their personal truths, define and categorize lies, uncover stereotypes that impact their lives, relate this to fiction, define memoir, and work through a prewrite, draft, and revision of a memoir. The memoirs and short stories for this unit are summarized below. The summaries include the specific lie, stereotype, or prejudice that drives the writing selection. Along with the summary is a guide that can be used to direct students to identify elements of craft. The material is presented in the order that I suggest it be unveiled while actually teaching the unit. Once students are actually in the drafting phase, they will be asked either to do a quick write based on the craft element in a particular selection or to choose portions of their drafts and add the element to their memoirs.

It can prove difficult to motivate some students to engage in reading and writing, especially when doing so exposes the students' fears and insecurities. In an effort to find compelling material, I searched for both memoir and realistic fiction that included stereotypes based on sex, gender identity, race, religion, body type, parental financial status, family configuration, disability, neighborhood, and social status—all topics about which students have questions. All students need to feel that they have something to offer. Michael Cart says:

[N]ontraditional families deal with...circumstances that often result in their being marginalized, rendered invisible, regarded as unacceptably different or even being persecuted by peers...How can "other" become "us?"...One way...is through reading fiction that captures - artfully, authentically, and unsparingly -the circumstances of kids whose lives are a daily experience of redefining family.¹⁸

Lesson Series 1: How Can You Help Students to Uncover Lies, Prejudice, and Stereotypes?

This lesson series will help to ease the students into sharing their truth-filled stories.

Lesson 1a

As an anticipatory set, follow this script:

- Close your eyes and do not open them until I give you the ok. (*Pass a blank paper and a pen to each student while they have their eyes closed.*)
- Raise one hand if you have ever been made fun of because of the way you look, the color of your skin, the clothes that you wear, the people that you like. Raise the other hand if you think that treatment might make you or others feel that certain people should be avoided or distrusted. Keep 'em up! If you feel uncomfortable sharing, put your hands down now; otherwise, keep them up, open your eyes. Now, let your burden down. It takes a lot out of someone to hold that stuff up. That's the point of this class—we'll be unburdening ourselves by reading and writing memoirs, or real life personal accounts, that reflect when these things have taught us something about ourselves.

To begin to uncover the stereotypes that students have experienced, the student should now use the paper to create a three-circle Venn with each circle headed as either *Lies*, *Stereotypes*, or *Prejudice*. They should brainstorm anything that strikes them as fitting those categories. On the other side of the paper, ask them to create a web, starting with a circle of the category of stereotype with which they have personally dealt. Limit this to three circles for time's sake. Branches should be placed off of each category that connect with student-generated questions such as, "Why did my friend call me a slur?" They can make correlations like, "I am a female and I like sports. People often call me a *tomboy*. I guess that means that they are saying I am not acting like a girl. Why do they do that? What constitutes 'acting like a girl'?" After several quiet minutes, encourage, but do not force, all of the students to read whatever portion of their writing they are willing to share. Ask: What is common about what we have shared? Why is it difficult to discuss?

End with a discussion about what they know about the memoir genre. Discuss how memoir and fiction connect. Ask: How do you think literature helps you to understand the world around you? How could your story help you and others?

Lesson 1b

Review prior discussions: What connections might lies, stereotypes, and prejudice have to the memoir genre?

What similarities and difference do you think fiction and memoir have? If not offered by the students, be sure to point out that the three essential components of a memoir are setting, situation, and a sharing of reaction and/or realization.

Though it is necessary to read to become a more effective writer, it is also imperative to give the students a chance to write before reading the work of others. I find that reading prior to writing turns them into style-parrots. Though pastiche, or 'write likes,' can prove to be powerful teaching tools, I want them to use their own voices, not others'. I also like to have a baseline writing assessment for each student prior to the start of formal writing instruction. For this reason, I will employ two writing and sharing experiences prior to beginning the reading of professionally written memoirs. The goal of the writing prompts is to have the students begin to openly discuss taboo topics?not to criticize their writing. Instead, they will be asked to voluntarily read aloud at least a portion of one of the prompt responses.

The first prompt requires the student to write about a time when they were on the receiving end of a lie. By asking the student to describe a time in which they have been on the receiving end of a lie rather than being the purveyor of a lie, toxicity is deflected from them, allowing the students to capture a setting, situation, and a sharing of reaction and/or realization -the three essential components of a memoir- *without* fear of turning inward. Ask them to share this writing by reading them aloud.

Lesson 1c

The next prompt will require students to reflect on a time in which they have been the purveyor of a lie. This prompt was chosen based on Goldberg's description of her first rule of writing practice, "Go for the jugular, for what makes you nervous. Otherwise, you will always be writing around your secrets, like the elephant that no one notices in the living room." ²⁶ This turns the toxicity up a notch from the prior prompt. It will cause the students to reflect on their own wrong doings, thus preparing them to tackle the upcoming larger issue-bearing witness to lies, stereotypes, and prejudice and doing something about it. On separate note cards as a pre-write organizer, the students will be asked to list: When, Where, Who, What, and Why. They will be instructed to formulate their outline in questions. For example, what lie was told? To whom was the lie told? They will answer their own questions and then rearrange the cards in a manner that best shows the story. They will be asked to read aloud all or a portion of their accounts.

Lesson Series 2: How Can Reading Help Students Learn to Write Well?

All writers need experience with well-constructed text. In order to make the reading experience palatable and independently doable, I use a set of guiding questions and a standard of marking the text. The two guiding questions that students will be expected to answer while reading are: What type of lie, stereotype, and or prejudice is the main character trying to work through? What experiences have you had with the above mentioned lie? (State your answer thoroughly in the format of your choice.)

When 'marking' text, I want the students to do it purposefully. I also want the behavior to be repeated independently, so I try to keep things very simple. I tell them to:

Underline any word, phrase, or line that you think is "crafty" or interesting. Circle any line in which the author reveals the lie, prejudice, or stereotype that is important to the overall development of the selection. Square any word that is unfamiliar. If you cannot figure it out using context clues, look it up. Mark a synonym in the margin. (Use these strategies with all remaining reading selections.)

Lesson 2a

Read *Smoky Nights* by Eve Bunting to the students. It is a short picture book. It has been chosen as the introductory reading selection because using the 'children's' book will allow me to quickly break into talks of stereotyping and prejudice seen in literature. No writing will take place. It is not a memoir, but it is in first person. In the book, a young boy is becoming aware that people look and act differently than his own family. ¹⁹ During a fire in the apartment in which he lives, he comes to understand that he was wrong to shy away from differences. ²⁰ The author's purpose is pretty clear?she is trying to show how stereotypes are passed along and that even children can learn to recognize, use, and eventually dispel such notions.

The craft elements that I would like my students to model are based in the simplistic, yet effective, use of language. Many middle-level students feel that they must inundate their writing with 'college-level' vocabulary. The selection is full of rich, yet easily-accessible word choices that can be used to discuss audience appropriateness when writing about difficult topics, such as racism. The toxicity undulates, making a serious topic palatable to younger audiences. These elements are the foundation for writing; choosing an audience and writing toward that audience. The students will be asked to work in teams to create a first-person, short children's narrative that includes the effects of a lie, prejudice, or stereotype. This will boost the student-to-student comfort level and help to build a writing community. They will share the stories with the class and discuss what is effective and what could be added or removed to make each more effective.

Lesson 2b

In order to continue on the path to openly sharing, students will be asked to read the selections aloud in teams. The strategy stems from a Creative Dramatics course at the University of Pittsburgh that promotes text interaction. Depending on the number of characters, students will be asked to read in the following manner: Student A reads whenever Character 1 is speaking, Student B reads all Narrator portions, Student B reads whenever character 2 is speaking, etc. Not only does this promote text interactions, but it makes audible the divisions in the text's structure, thus helping to highlight it for the budding writers.

Read Isaiah Washington's memoir in Etan Thomas' *Fatherhood*. In it, Washington recalls the funeral of his never-present father. It demonstrates a respect for his mother and that personal choice dictates success, not race or, in his case, a lack of fraternal involvement. I expect many of my students will make the assumption that this athlete would not be so articulate. Washington has an interior life aside from sports. He masterfully uses many craft elements.

Students should be made aware that Washington's format uses a weaving of past and present. His writing is lush, descriptive, yet accessible. Washington consistently employs antithesis to hone in on his reality. For example, he writes, "Over the years [my father] has been the biggest presence, yet he's a stranger who means nothing to me." ²¹ He uses well-crafted figurative language, such as, "Strong family fingers grip my shoulders." ²² A discussion of alliteration and metaphor should take place. Was the family literally gripping his shoulders? Perhaps, but the strength of the line lies in its figurative usage. Why effect does alliteration have? It places visual and auditory emphasis upon certain images and details. A good way to have students explore his use of figurative language is to execute a pastiche?by using Washington's concept of something being simultaneously both 'present and absent', students can model his writing while examining their own memories.

Students will begin to write their own memoirs now. In order to help the students begin to write, I have

created a prewriting organizer (See **Appendices**). The organizer establishes the expectation for what is to be included within each memoir. I tell them that it is mandatory and that all drafts must include the organizer. I also do this because it is a simplistic, fast approach to getting all levels of writers started. It also places a gentle hand over the mouths that say, 'But I don't do prewrites!'

Lesson 2c

Sharon Olds poem, "On the Subway" is a reflection about how others wonder about each other, rather than ask questions aloud. Olds' poem is set on a subway train while she compares what she looks like to the appearance of the young African-American boy seated across from her. She is brave in her honesty, as seen in this lines /...And he is black/and I am white, and without meaning or/trying to I must profit from his darkness²³. The purpose for using this poem is both to show an uncommon form of memoir and to focus on the importance of honesty in the development of a powerful memoir. Ask: How would this piece be different if Olds was not brave enough to be honest about her own prejudices? Her language is simplistic, but powerful. Why? How? Students will be asked to consider the two formats of memoir in Washington's and Olds' work. They will be asked to discuss which format feels right for their memoirs. The drafting of their individual memoirs will now begin.

Lesson 2d

Harriet McBryde Johnson's *Too Late to Die Young: Nearly True Tales from a Life*, seems to do my job for me. McBryde's memoirs paint a remarkably resilient and self-confident woman. Stricken with congenital neuromuscular disease from childhood, she has many physical limitations. The writing is focused on the stereotypical notions that she has lived to dispel? a person should not be defined by her or his disability. In the preface memoir, she focuses much more on who she is rather than focusing on life-shaping situations. Her language is direct, if not scolding. The voice created stands up for her. For example, she writes, "[M]y stories don't aim to satisfy the general curiosity about what it is like to live in a withered body."²⁴

McBryde's structure is in contrast to the form used by Isaiah Washington in that he spends more time in the background story/situation. Washington is sharing his experience with himself as the receiver of truth; McBryde is almost directly sending out a message to the reader that their truths are not her truths. Students should be asked to orally compare these two structures, why the authors might have used them, and what effect such choices have on the reader. Students will be asked to evaluate their own memoir structure. Ask: What is gained or lost by your choice of structure? What is the difference between Washington's language and McBryde's language? How does word choice help to establish tone? What tone do you wish to use in your memoir? What word choice might help (student A, B, C, etc.) establish such a tone? Once the discussion ends, the students will continue to draft their memoirs.

Lesson 2e

In chapter two of Richard Wright's *Black Boy*, a scene is developed in which Richard questions his mother about race.²⁵ The majority of the selection is written as dialog. Though Wright wrote this as an adult, the reader can hear his voice as a curious child. For example, Wright wrote:

Naively I wanted to go see how the whites looked while sitting in their part of the train. "Can I go peep at the white folks?" I asked my mother. "You keep quiet," she said. "But that wouldn't be wrong, would it?" "Will you keep still?" "But why

can't I?" 26

Dialog is a way to help students create their characters' voices as Wright did. In memoir writing, dialog presents a form of lying?since the writer is drawing from memory, he or she may embellish the dialog. Students need to know that this is acceptable and, perhaps, necessary. Students will be asked to re-read a portion of Wright's dialog and, in pairs, list rules for writing dialog. While discussing their 'rules' as a group, be sure to cover the following: What the character says is placed inside of quotations. Punctuation for the character's statement goes inside of the quotation marks. When dialog is on-going, each character's statement is moved to a new line and indented. The narrator typically only uses a period. Though it is okay to occasionally use 'said,' it is better to use more descriptive dialog indicators, such a balked, raged, or 'showing' indicators such as, "His angry red lips curled to a grimace." Not every chunk of dialog requires a dialog indicator.

Have the students compare the language in the past three reading selections. Ask: Which is more floral? Which is more direct? Which is most powerful? Why? Which do you prefer for your memoir? Why?

Lesson 2f

Students will be asked to spend the first half of class working on their choice of a 100-125 word section of their memoirs-in-progress. They will mark their own copy with the age of their characters. They will print a copy and the selection will be rotated around the room so that students can try to rework each other sentences according to age-appropriate voice, adding dialog as each sees fit.

Lesson 2g

At this point, I expect that many students will be entering the revision process or, perhaps, may be done writing. Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* is the author's memoirs presented in graphic novel form. This will be introduced to the students as an alternative to writing an entirely new memoir. They will be given an option to illustrate one of their own memoirs, stating the reason behind their choices for text and image use.

The setting of Satrapi's novel is revolution-era 1960's Tehran, Iran, but the main characters are quite westernized. The theme of the body of work could be framed as: What is the cultural impact of any form of segregation? Though the graphics are in black and white, the author creates a vivid image of herself and her country through vibrant illustrations and simplistic, but powerful, text. Satrapi's parents are liberal in their parenting style. Both parents encourage and support her individuality and creativity, but society does not. This is illustrated when she, at the age of six, has developed a love of God. The illustration depicts her as she's exclaiming, "I am the Last Prophet." To which a group of men sneer, "A woman?" "27

The students will read the first 20 pages, and then watch the movie version to the same scene. The students will be asked what effect the various square sizes have on the storyline. They will be asked to discuss what the images give or take from the memoir genre. They will note the page and square number in which they can directly see the adaptation from book-to-screen. We will discuss why they think such choices were made.

Lesson Series 3: How Can Students Be Guided to Help One Another with Revisions?

A responding sequence can be used so that students can help one another grow as audience-focused writers. This is best modeled by having the students respond first to a teacher's own writing sample.

Lesson 3a

Students should be required to place their drafts of their memoirs in a bin. Four questions will guide each response session, which can simply be clipped to the top of each memoir: 1) What lie, stereotype, or prejudice is explored in this memoir? List it. 2) Does the memoir cover a setting, situation, and a sharing of reaction and/or realization? If so, state each in a complete sentence. If not, note the missing component on the top of the writer's work. 3) Are there any gaps of connectivity in the text? If so, list questions that might lead them to make the connection(s). 4) What elements of craft has the author used? Make a list with an example from the text and/or explain in a complete sentence. If you see none, make no comment.

Lesson 3b

Writers need to read their work aloud to hear the flow of the sentences and the pattern of word choices. Students are more willing to do this with a teacher; however, I require them to work together prior to asking me for help. They are, after all, writing for their own age group. While the students read to me, I fill out the same four questions as listed above in Lesson 3b. I then read it myself, editing for grammar and punctuation errors. If the student makes the same mistake repeatedly, then we discuss the issues. Never make the esteem-squashing mistake of telling a student what to add or change. Instead, formulate questions that allow the student to tell you about his or her choices. If what the student tells you is not evident in the text, then you can direct him or her to expand a portion of their writing.

Lesson Series 4: How Can Students' Work Impact Other People?

The final step in the writing process is publication. If this step is not reached, the student will not understand the power or pride of authorship.

Lesson 4a

Students will be asked to choose one of their revised memoirs and audio record themselves reading it. Each recorded memoir will be added to an 'Audio Anthology.'

Lesson 4b

During our final two classes, students will listen to one another's readings and write "reviews" of each author's work that includes a statement about how the 'truthfulness' has impacted them.

Standards

The Common Core State Standards that will be covered in this unit are:

Key Ideas and Details

1. Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
2. Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting

details and ideas.

3. Analyze how and why individuals, events, and ideas develop and interact over the course of a text.

Craft and Structure

4. Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.

5. Analyze the structure of texts, including how specific sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text (e.g., a section, chapter, scene, or stanza) relate to each other and the whole.

6. Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas

7. Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse formats and media, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

8. Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, including the validity of the reasoning as well as the relevance and sufficiency of the evidence.

9. Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.

Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity

10. Read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently.

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that a reader can make about life. The introduction reads like a memoir. The remainder of the book is a series of self-revelation and reflections on conversation had with students during discussions about literature. It alludes to the necessity of questioning oneself.

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Johnson, Harriet McBryde. *Too Late to Die Young: Nearly True Tales from a Life*. New York: Picador, 2006. A memoir written by a remarkably resilient and self-confident woman with congenital neuromuscular disease. The writing is focused on the stereotypical notions that she has lived to dispel.

Lester, Julius. "Morality and the New *Huckleberry Finn*" in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn: Case Study in Controversy*. Gerald Graff, ed. Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, 1995. A critical analysis of the failings of Mark Twain to paint an accurate picture of Jim as an African American man.

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Norton, Lisa Dale. *Shimmering Images: A Handy Little Guide to Writing Memoir*. New York, NY: St. Martin's Griffin, 2008. A short, but much focused, guide on writing memoirs.

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Orenstein, Peggy. "What's Wrong with Cinderella?"

<http://www.nytimes.com/2006/12/24/magazine/24princess.t.html?pagewanted=all>, December 24, 2006. A tirade about how consumerism creates a limiting 'princess' mold for which to raise girls.

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Satrapı, Marjane. *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*. New York: Pantheon, 2003. A memoir presented in graphic novel form.

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Wright, Richard. *Black Boy (American Hunger)*. New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2005. An autobiography that, at its core, glimpses the life of an African American from 1910's through the 1930's. The major themes are race relations, lying, violence, intellectual curiosity, and self-fulfillment.

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Appendices

Memoir Pre-write Organizer

Name: Current Date: Current Age:

State the stereotype category that you have experienced that you will pin-point in your memoir:

In a sentence, describe the specific branch of stereotype that you will pin-point in your memoir:

State the age you were at the time of your memoir experience:

Specifically name the people, ages at the time of the event, and relationship you had with the each person who is involved in this *memory*:

For each person, including you, list a specific sensory detail about each person:

Recreate the setting as you remember it using all five senses:

State the theme of your memoir in the form of a single, complete question:

Create a list of words and/or phrases that describe your emotions before, during, and after the memory:

Pick up to three motifs (*threaded images*) that correspond with your memory AND theme:

Endnotes

¹ Khaled Hosseini, *The Kite Runner*, 17-18.

² Ibid.

³ Julius Lester, in *Mark Twain, Adventures of Huckleberry Finn: Casebook Study in Controversy*, 342.

⁴ Peggy Orenstein, in *Cinderella Ate My Daughter: Dispatches from the Front Lines of the New Girlie-Girl Culture*, 13.

⁵ Peggy Orenstein, in "What's Wrong with Cinderella?"

<http://www.nytimes.com/2006/12/24/magazine/24princess.t.html?pagewanted=all>, accessed July 10, 2012.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Julius Lester, in "Morality and the New *Huckleberry Finn*" in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn: Case Study in Controversy*, 342.

⁹ Ben Yagoda, in *Memoir: A History*, 3.

¹⁰ Judith Barrington, in *Writing the Memoir*, 2nd ed, 19.

¹¹ John Gardener, in *The Art of Fiction*, 213.

¹² Pascal, 82.

¹³ Judith Barrington, in *Writing the Memoir*, 16.

¹⁴ Lisa Dale Norton, in *Shimmering Images: A Handy Little Guide to Writing Memoir*, XV.

¹⁵ Robert Coles, in *The Call of Stories: Teaching and the Moral Imagination*, 19.

¹⁶ Natalie Goldberg, in *Old Friend from Far Away: The Practice of Writing Memoir*, 13.

¹⁷ Timothy Dow Adams. Fabre, "Afterword," 138.

¹⁸ Michael Cart, in *Necessary Noise*, X-XI.

¹⁹ Eve Bunting. *Smoky Nights*.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Isaiah Washington in *Fatherhood: Rising to the Ultimate Challenge*, 21-22.

²² Ibid.

²³ Sharon Olds, "On the Subway."

²⁴ Harriet McBryde Johnson's *Too Late to Die Young: Nearly True Tales from a Life*, 9-13.

²⁵ Richard Wright. *Black Boy*. Chapter 2.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Marjane Satrapi. *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*, 6-8.

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