



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative
2013 Volume II: Interpreting Texts, Making Meaning: Starting Small

Interpreting the Urban Landscape

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Teaching and Learning Objectives

The narrative and subsequent lesson plans provide teachers with: 1) an understanding of what one might mean when she says "interpretation", 2) a guide for teaching students to interpret texts, even complex ones, 3) culturally-relevant content focused on location and identity rather than on arbitrary anthologized text choices. By the end of the unit, students will become adept at literary criticism in two modes (verbally and in writing) and will have tried their own hands at interpreting the world around them via poetry.

Carl Sandburg, author of the iconic poem "Chicago," described the place where I now live and teach as the "City of the Big Shoulders."⁽¹⁾ This description—especially the nickname—is both a part of the way Chicagoans see Chicago and has become a part of the way others view the city: it is capable of holding up an incredibly diverse and massive population. Sandburg's depiction of the city throughout the rest of the poem is fairly objective (highlighting both positive and negative aspects of the city), but others—such as Chicago rapper King Louie—refer to it in largely negative terms, using the moniker "Chiraq,"⁽²⁾ which is a portmanteau that compares violence-stricken Chicago to the war-torn nation of Iraq. These images are a part of a local dialogue of how people interpret the city in which they live. They tap into a larger experience of urban life, which ranges from the sophisticated to the gritty.

I would be remiss if I did not mention that I am writing this unit just days after the verdict in a now-infamous court case has been released: George Zimmerman of Sanford, Florida (a small city in the Orlando metropolitan area), has been found not guilty of second-degree murder and manslaughter in the fatal shooting of seventeen year-old Trayvon Martin. Yale National Seminar Leader Professor Joseph Roach said in a lecture on July 16, 2013 that Martin represented a threatened population⁽³⁾—that is, urban youth (especially youth of color) threaten the larger social order and are often relegated to a separate space. That separate space is one I hope to illuminate in this unit and discuss its position in relation to other elements of what Roach referred to as the "human landscape of the city."⁽⁴⁾ I want my students—many of whom are youth of color—to feel as if their voices and experiences are valued. I want their cities to—borrowing the language of another YNI National Seminar—become visible.

Adolescence is a time of wonder, and in that stage of perpetual questioning and inquiry, students often ponder some of the same questions: Who am I and what is this world around me? It's developmentally appropriate for students to begin with the self and work out to make meaning out of the world.

Hermeneutics—that is, the art and science of interpretation—is not necessarily something a high school teacher might want to offer up as an introductory vocabulary word, but it does make for an interesting jumping off point in designing lessons geared toward guiding students to more sophisticated, college-ready thinking.

This unit integrates Common Core-aligned reading, writing, and discussion skills. Students will explore the idea of what it means to be a part of an urban landscape vis-à-vis others' depictions of cities and urban life. They will also become experienced practitioners of hermeneutics as they interrogate others' depictions of urban life and, in turn, offer up their own; they will become literary critics and poets at the same time.

Introduction

I came to explore the wreck. The words are purposes. The words are maps. —Adrienne Rich, "Diving Into the Wreck"(5)

Adrienne Rich's "Diving Into the Wreck" is a poem, on the literal level, about exploration. It has always resonated with me on a metaphorical level—especially the above lines—because it seems to correlate with the way one explores a poem. First, we begin with a curiosity: perhaps we have heard about the poem before; it is, like the Titanic, famous—something we simply *must* explore. Then, we start to dive in. It might be unclear at times when the water is murky, but we are still invested in the act of interpreting. Eventually, we arrive at a truth about the poem, the world, or about ourselves.

Just as the diver cannot explore the wreck alone on his or her first experience in the deep sea, it is not reasonable to expect a student to jump into interpreting any sort of text alone his or her first time in the "deep sea" of literature. The interpretative process needs to be scaffolded appropriately so students can build confidence in their responses to literature. This unit is designed to offer a jumping off point for students to immerse themselves in the act of interpretation on several levels. First, students will learn to critically consume and interpret texts. Then, they will write their own texts, which will be—in a sense—interpretations of the world around them.

My students live in Chicago—a place full of diverse neighborhoods and rich history. And yet, I am unsure if they can define what it means to live in any city, let alone their city. Throughout this unit, I want students to question what it means to live in a city and to decide whether there is a unifying urban experience. Are their lives different, for example, from Richard Wright's when he lived in Paris—or from T.S. Eliot's London life? Or—are they more similar than they might have expected? Can urban experiences transcend lines of race, class, gender, or history? I want my students to consider these and many more questions as they engage in a collective and comparative interpretation of the urban landscape that envelops them.

This unit explores the intersection between interpretation and creation. Postmodern critics would have us believe that texts are open to a continual interpretation (and reinterpretation); similarly, semioticians see all things as text (from cereal boxes to novels) full of signs worthy of interpreting. This curriculum unit will not focus on getting students to explicitly adopt any sort of theoretical paradigm; instead, this curriculum unit will focus on getting students to see general interpretative possibilities that can unlock new meaning and new ways of seeing the world. But, before I can explain how I will do that with my students, I must first introduce

you to my students.

About Chicago Academy High School

Chicago Academy High School (CAHS), one of 106 public high schools in Chicago, is located on the city's Northwest side. Though there are similarities between many urban public schools, there are a few things worth noting about Chicago Academy. As with the rest of their Chicago Public Schools counterparts, my students are largely low income: 83.3% of our students have been identified as such,⁽⁶⁾ compared with 86.6% of students district-wide. Furthermore, keeping in line with other schools in the district, a significant portion of my students (15.1%)⁽⁷⁾ has an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). All of my ninth grade classes next year have been designated as inclusion classes; for this reason, I will be working with a co-teacher 75% of the time to collaborate, plan, and instruct our students. We have no support for our substantial English Language Learner (ELL) population—primarily because, though my own internal classroom data show that more than 50% of my students are bilingual, only 3.6% are designated as Limited English Proficient according to district data. At home, my students and their families speak Arabic, English, French, Polish, Serbian, Spanish, Tigrinya, and Ukrainian. As one might imagine, my students' diverse linguistic backgrounds can present both wonderful teachable moments and instructional challenges.

At CAHS, I teach English and reading to ninth grade students who have been identified as struggling readers (according to a variety of data points). My students need explicit comprehension instruction, because—on average—they read three to five years below their grade-level peers. The English and reading class is designed as an intervention: It is for struggling readers in their first year of high school to ensure that they may be at or above grade level by the time they graduate. This growth is measured almost exclusively by the Northwest Evaluation Association's Measures of Academic Progress exam (commonly referred to as the NWEA MAP); however, students' progress is also measured by their fall-to-spring growth on the reading section of the EXPLORE exam (the first in a series of American College Testing—or ACT— college readiness exams). Even after a year of intervention, many of my students will still be at least slightly below grade level; this is due to the huge deficits with which many enter.

Much of what I do in my classroom relies on student and parent buy-in. My ninth grade struggling readers grapple with different kinds of text levels: independent-level texts, instructional-level texts, and— at times— frustration-level texts. As a teacher, I want my students to know how to handle any sort of text thrown at them—from recipe books and manuals to James Joyce's *Ulysses*. Accomplishing this requires students to practice daily, using comprehension strategies to unlock the texts we set forth for them. It also requires students to have a real sense of themselves as readers and people.

That self-awareness has been crucial, as I have worked to create within students the confidence to authentically respond to and struggle openly with texts. In the past, my students became adept at selecting novels and short stories for independent reading, but still struggled with instructional-level texts that required them to rely on knowledge of broader literary genres and forms beyond those covered in the narrow scope of young adult literature most were comfortable reading. Some had difficulty because, in addition to lacking exposure to a variety of genres and forms of literature, they also lacked necessary background knowledge. (In the case of *The Odyssey*, for example, my students have had little to no prior knowledge of Greek mythology, which has complicated their initial readings.) I still want to work students up to texts that are, instructionally, challenges; I just want to better structure the learning experience for my students so that they can be successful in interpreting challenging poems, stories, and novels.

The Building Blocks: Routines and Materials

This unit is tied together by daily routine, but can work in a classroom where students do not necessarily meet daily (as in a block-schedule classroom). I have the luxury of meeting with my students for 86 minutes each day, but I believe these methods are adaptable for any classroom. There are some materials essential to making this work, listed in the appendix on suggested materials. Additionally, students must have copies of poems to annotate and interact with if at all possible. If this is not possible (because of copying restrictions at your school), select shorter poems from the recommended text list—like Richard Wright's urban haiku— that students might be able to write out on their own paper.

Rationale

My students are intelligent, curious, and passionate. As teachers, I hope we can all say such wonderful things about the students we teach; consequently, I hope all of our students believe those things to be true about themselves. Too often, I see my students' intellectual curiosities stymied by pressures that seem insurmountable, especially those driven by a culture of standardized testing. I am a believer in using data to guide planning for my students, but I also want to make sure that they never lose those three attributes to which I referred at the beginning of this paragraph. So, the paradox lies within having to serve two purposes: We must satisfy the standards-based moment we live in— educationally; and—this is the more important purpose, I think—we must prepare our students to participate as citizens of the world.

For my students at Chicago Academy High School, being prepared for the world also means being prepared for college. Our small public high school is one that prides itself on its college preparatory curriculum and has sent students to the likes of Knox College, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and—just this year—Pomona College. We are growing in our capacity to prepare students for increasingly selective institutions. One of the most frequently recurring themes that graduates of my school come back to discuss with former teachers is whether or not they have been prepared to tackle a variety of texts with confidence. Many feel that, although they wrote many papers and had ample opportunities to read, they didn't learn to read deeply until they reached college. This was my own experience as an undergraduate student, and one that perplexes me: Why is deeper (or close) reading of texts delayed until post-secondary study?

The very act of interpretation is often isolated from other "tasks" (chief among them, comprehension) in the English classroom. It is almost as if one expects students to function as separate machinists on an intellectual assembly line; there is one place for comprehension, another for interpretation, and so on. Texts, then, are frequently selected for a given task: a nonfiction passage is chosen for comprehension-focused instruction, or a poem is picked for interpretation. It seems illogical to separate comprehension from interpretation. And if it isn't how we think, then why do we—as teachers—ever structure our reading instruction in this way?

What Is Interpretation?

"For there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so." — William Shakespeare,
Hamlet(8)

One meaning of the word *interpretation* is "a teaching technique that combines factual with stimulating explanatory information." (9) Denis Donoghue asserts that interpretation is simply what occurs when one

notices things in a text.(10) Those things, though—according to E.D. Hirsch—are a part of a hermeneutic circle; that is to say, one must know the whole before one may get to know the individual parts, yet one cannot know the parts without figuring out its situatedness within the whole.(11) Shakespeare (via Prince Hamlet) even throws in his two cents, suggesting that the act of cognition alone creates meaning. All of this might make one's head spin—especially when adding in the great dispute about whether or not the intention of the author matters (see "The Intentional Fallacy").(12) Therefore, I do not propose defining interpretation along any of these existing lines. Instead, I think it would be best to use a "non-example" to express what interpretation is *not*.

One of the reasons some of my colleagues and I have previously shied away from teaching entire units on poetry is this: they are loath to begin a dialogue where anything goes in terms of interpretation, and they—by and large—associate the "anything goes" attitude with poetry, specifically. Yet, along with so many of my colleagues, I do want to empower and give voice to the amazing young people we teach. If a poem is about a ghost, how can we compassionately lead a student toward an interpretation that extends beyond "It is a poem about my summer vacation" if that summer vacation was more about reading ghost stories and less about actually experiencing supernatural occurrences? How do we deftly and thoughtfully guide our students toward more "correct" interpretations, even while allowing multiple interpretative perspectives to flourish in our classrooms?

Laurence Perrine(13) suggests that an interpretation is not valid if it can be contradicted by any detail. So, interpretation—to be correct—must be sound enough to rely only (or mostly) on what exists within the text itself. This baseline will allow us, as teachers, to make sure that our students understand that—to return to the example—a ghost might be a ghost in a story (such as *Hamlet*) as long as someone else cannot make a more compelling, text-based argument that it is something else entirely. Then, both in my own opinion and in Perrine's, the interpretation would need to be amended to account for the more correct information. The trick is in guiding our students to that point—in teaching our students to think less like people who arbitrarily circle "C" on standardized tests and more like literary critics.

Teaching Students to Think Like Literary Critics

As we—across the nation, the state of Illinois, and in the city of Chicago— shift our thinking toward embracing the Common Core Standards, it is even more imperative that students be able to think like literary critics. That is to say, students must be versed in the craft and structure of literature and they must possess the necessary skills to comprehend, analyze, and interpret texts. This type of thinking expands far beyond what many are used to in this era of standardized data-driven culture. My ninth grade students, fresh off what many in Chicago (and the entire state of Illinois) refer to as "an ISAT"(14) year, are not accustomed to thinking of texts beyond multiple choice and specific, guided "extended response" writing passages.

When I ask my students to engage in freer, more authentic responses to literature using the methods of Sheridan Blau (and his groundbreaking 2003 text *The Literature Workshop*), I guide my students through a series of mental gymnastics. I am as uncomfortable in leading these activities as they are in participating them. I hold an undergraduate degree in English, have been teaching now for three years, and have attended numerous professional developments on secondary English teaching methods; so, what is the problem? My problem has been in making my own thinking—my metacognitive process— accessible for students. This unit is designed to unpack the cognitive process that one goes through when reading and interpreting any sort of text.

In my own experience, I really began to understand what it meant to "interpret" a text in a modernist poetry

course during my sophomore year of college. I was able to dig deep into smaller chunks of text— working my way up through longer poems (T.S. Eliot's "The Wasteland," for example) armed with my new interpretative toolkit. Though I'd heard terms like "metaphor" and "scansion" before, I had never considered why they mattered beyond imagining that, perhaps, the poet just liked those things. So, as an eighteen year-old (not much older than the students I now teach) I was finally having an experience I might have been able to have earlier if a teacher had known how to guide me through it at a younger age.

The 2013 Yale National Seminar I was a part of, entitled "Interpreting Texts, Making Meaning: Starting Small" emphasized the way in which one can apply the tools and language of literary criticism to a variety of texts. We began by looking at children's picture books, then working our ways through increasingly longer texts: first, a haiku; then, a stanza-long poem; next, a multi-stanza poem; and—eventually—a Shakespearian tragedy. Along with the teachers with whom I was so fortunate to collaborate, I became more aware of my own thinking as a learner. I was no longer just wearing the "teacher" hat; I was engaged in the process of interpretation with other National Fellows, and was re-immersed in the interpretative process as a teacher-learner. I have synthesized strategies I had already used and formed new understandings of their usefulness in my classroom and their implications for others' work in classrooms across the country. As a result, I have selected from my repertoire of borrowed strategies and favorite texts to settle upon a few that seem most appropriate for modeling and working through the act of interpretation, considering this unit's aims.

Text Selection, Unit Objectives and Anticipated Outcomes

This unit focuses, thematically, on the ways in which we interpret the urban experience— eventually zeroing in on students' own experiences as urban citizens. It starts simple: with children's books such Virginia Lee Burton's *The Little House*— texts that are small, yet lend themselves to different methods of interpretation. It then moves into contemporary poetry and song lyrics— including spoken word poetry by Chicago poet Ayesha Jaco (sister of famed hip-hop artist Lupe Fiasco). Similarly, my students are more comfortable looking at smaller chunks of text—even if they are, like Ezra Pound's "In a Station of the Metro," deceptively complex. It's the same reason that struggling readers gravitate toward books in the popular Bluford series of young adult literature before they dive into *Harry Potter* or *The Hunger Games*: Smaller texts feel more approachable. Thus, I will begin to teach my students how to interpret texts by starting small. We will work our way up to larger texts, and— eventually— students will create and analyze their own texts.

I want to keep texts accessible in the beginning and keep to a minimum the necessary background knowledge students will need in order to interpret texts historically or biographically. We will then delve into less accessible texts (in terms of knowledge students come to the table with) such as the poetry of Gwendolyn Brooks and Richard Wright's urban haiku. As we navigate these texts together, we will touch on the structure of each text as well as necessary outside information (biographical, historical, cultural, or otherwise) that can enhance interpretation. Finally, we will explore Carl Sandburg's *Chicago Poems*— especially the poem simply entitled "Chicago".

Throughout the exploration of these texts— primarily poetic commentaries on the urban experience— students should engage with the unit's two distinct essential questions: *What is interpretation?* and *What is Chicago, to you?* Students will have gained an understanding not just of their own positions within an urban landscape (as depicted in their own original poetry); they will have learned how to read closely and interpret

texts beyond what they will likely have been previously comfortable with. As they read the texts covered in this unit, students will respond in reading log format. Students will also produce original poems— their own "Chicago" poems— which will be published in a poetry chapbook and which they will analyze in log format. Those reading log responses will eventually transform into a literary analysis essay. By the end of the unit, students will understand how to grapple with literature like a literary critic and think beyond the level of basic comprehension.

Illuminating An Urban Experience

When I have previously used the word "urban" with my students, I have found that very few—unless they have taken a sociology elective—know how to accurately define the term. Once, when discussing a series of "urban fairytales" (Francesca Lia Block's *Dangerous Angels*), a student defined the word urban as "ghetto." I will revisit the word "ghetto" momentarily—but this word knowledge deficit is both intriguing and disturbing. So often my students are referred to as "urban public school students," "urban students of color," and "urban students of poverty," and yet—many do not know how to accurately define one of the adjectives used to describe them. So, the first hurdle is in getting students to define what *urban* is.

What Urban Is Not

I find the word "ghetto" problematic, though my students use it regularly. And, it ends up being the first in a series of words my students will throw out when I ask them to define "city." Though many of my students are, in fact, ghettoed by institutionalized racism and poverty, it is rare (except in referring to historic Jewish ghettos, such as the Warsaw Ghetto) that my students ever mean that. The adjective is frequently used to refer to elements of urban life, especially things that are less savory or are, in some way, sub-standard. Students might describe another's clothing as "ghetto" if he or she is wearing second-hand or out-of-style fashions; or, a student's hair might be seen as "ghetto" if it does not bear markers of an attempt at racial or ethnic assimilation. Because I see the word as a continuation of the oppression that my students inadvertently perpetuate, I know I have to turn any utterance of that word into a teachable moment for my students.

I do think it is helpful, though, to call to mind students' associations of words with places—urban, suburban, and rural. I think it is best to guide my students to a definition of the word "urban" by showing them images of what an urban area *is not*. This, for me, is relatively easy: I grew up in the Appalachian region and simply—as a way of defining *not urban*— share with my students pictures from my childhood— of my small, remote elementary school or of my friend's goat tied to a post outside of her front door. This was a part of my reality. I ask my students: *What do you see? What do you not see?*

After students get over the fact that—yes, my childhood friends lived among barnyard animals—they will likely get at a couple of things we can accept as fundamental truths about the differences between urban and rural life: urban areas have more people, rural areas tend to contain more agriculture, and so on. There are, of course, exceptions to all of these things that my students will, perhaps, tease out over time—such as urban farming movements like the Milwaukee-based Growing Power; but making informed generalizations as a first step can help guide students to interpretations of texts later in this unit.

What Makes a City?

Then, we will start talking about what things make the city a city. In Chicago, aside from the densely populated neighborhoods in which my students live, they might refer to The El (the city's elevated railways). Or, they may call to mind parks like Millennium Park or—in my school's neighborhood—Riis Park. Perhaps

acknowledgement of the monoculture I came from in Southwestern Pennsylvania will help my students to recognize the diversity of food or cultures that surrounds them. There are, of course, elements of city life that my students will inevitably bring up because of the frequency with which they are confronted by them: gangs and drugs, primarily.

I think that the spoken word track "Ayesha Says"(15) accurately captures the ethnoscape(16) that my students encounter on a daily basis. She begins with single images from what very well may be Chicago (or a universal city): "Hijabs, hoodies, afros, locks / teddy bear, liquor bottle shrines, rocks / Tanks, prayer rugs, church pews, Mexican corn stands / Blood, sweat, and tears, police batons / Gas masks and bullets create graffiti on corners." I can imagine that my students will be able to make sense of some of the images in this performance. I will appeal to their senses, asking: *What do you see?*, *What do you smell?*, and *What do you hear?* The first few lines of this poem will form a jumping-off point for students to then add their own markers of urban life—such things as mentioned previously: riding the El, walking along Humboldt Park's Paseo Boricua, or experiencing a class trip to Millennium Park, for example.

Once students have collaborated on class and individual definitions of "urban" life, they can begin to move into coding poems as sociologists might code interviews: looking for single words or images that call to mind urban ideas or experiences. Take, for example, the memorable first stanza of Carl Sandburg's "Chicago:"(17)

HOG Butcher for the World, Tool Maker, Stacker of Wheat, Player with Railroads and the Nation's
Freight Handler; Stormy, husky, brawling, City of the Big Shoulders

This poem will present a certain challenge to any student—from Chicago or not. I imagine students will be able to discern the last line of the stanza as explicitly urban (as it uses the word "city"), but what about the rest? To understand the status of the city as the "Hog Butcher for the World" or the "Player with Railroads," students might benefit from having a bit of historical context about the stockyards and railroads that were the focus of life for Chicagoans in the early 1900s. Or—they may simply latch onto the "City of the Big Shoulders" and see it as a celebration of the city's strength. No matter what sort of meaning they make, after completing the activities in this unit, students will have an idea of what Carl Sandburg has to say about cities; whether or not they agree with his depiction of the city as a universal entity (and—for my students specifically—his depiction of Chicago); and how his Chicago meshes with their own notions of space, place, and identity.

Interpreting The Urban Landscape

Operating under the premise that interpretations are valid if they can be backed up with sufficient evidence (and only that premise—not under any sort of umbrella of "theory"), I will arm my budding literary critics with pencil and paper, setting them to the task of interpreting a complex text. One guiding question will be: "What is the speaker's attitude toward the city/cities?" The first text will be something deceptively simple (Virginia Burton's picture book entitled *The Little House*), which I will elaborate on in the Teaching Methods section. An appropriate second text is Hilda Doolittle' (H.D.)'s poem "Cities".(18)

I will demonstrate how one might look for evidence of a particular attitude in such a text. "Cities" is a rather long poem, so it makes the most sense to break it into chunks in the "I Do/We Do/You Do" model of scaffolding instruction. The first stanza begins:

Can we believe—by an effort comfort our hearts: it is not waste all this, not placed here in disgust, street after street, each patterned alike, no grace to lighten a single house of the hundred crowded into one garden-space.

After reading the stanza aloud to students, I will ask: "What words are unclear?" Once we have established a baseline and all can comprehend the vocabulary on the same level, we will be able to move into a literal interpretation of the text: I will ask students to tell me what they think the topic of the poem is, then ask what the first stanza is about. Given that the title of the text is "Cities," it is likely that students will pick that out as a topic. (It might be interesting, though, to give students the text without the title to see what they tease out.) Beyond that, the students will likely need more guidance getting to the summarization of the first stanza.

To guide students to being able to summarize the initial lines, I will ask: "Who is the speaker? What kind of a person do you think he or she is? In what way would you characterize her or him?" There are conflicting ideas in the first lines of the poem—the words comfort/waste and disgust/grace, for example. Students will—perhaps with some prompting—be able to locate them ("See if you can find ideas or words that are the same and ideas that are opposites"). To establish the speaker's mindset, we will then discuss what it is like when someone brings up such opposing ideas about a given topic. H.D. is writing about cities; H.D. feels *conflicted* about cities.

The conflict further intensifies in the subsequent stanzas: the city is crowded; the city is beautiful; the city is decaying; the city is full of vibrant relics of the past. Students will likely be able to connect the speaker's apparent ambivalence around the topic of cities to the tension in *The Little House*. The question then arises: based upon these two authors' depictions of generic cities, what are some identifying characteristics of cities? Students can brainstorm lists using evidence from each text. The interpretative act comes in through using the evidence. (For example: "According to H.D.'s poem, cities are...")

Interpretation is not something that happens in isolation, though— not just something we simply "do" or can teach as a skill. There is much discussion in K-12 educator circles about what is often called "critical thinking," usually couched somewhere in the language of Bloom's Taxonomy. The thing is, interpretation requires one to work through *all* levels of the taxonomy before reaching the end. And, even when one does reach the "end," he or she is likely to revise the thinking to entertain a new interpretation. There are two tools I find useful for thinking about how the cyclical process of interpretation will play out in the classes I teach: The Literature Workshop and Paideia Seminars.

Teaching Methods

The Literature Workshop

I think it is important for students to read like writers—to read in multiple "drafts"(19). I believe in a three-part reading of a text, such as what Robert Scholes suggests: reaction, interpretation, and criticism(20). Sheridan Blau, a professor of English and education at the University of California, Santa Barbara, explicates Scholes' ideas in *The Literature Workshop*. He sees the three-part reading as having three central questions: "What does it say?" "What does it mean?" and "What is its value? or So what?"(21) Accordingly, in this unit students will be looking at texts—starting small and working larger—multiple times and for multiple purposes. Eventually, they will write and discuss based upon their writing.

Blau's work has heavily influenced my teaching(22). My students read and write about their reading daily—often twice a day (in class and at home). My co-teacher and I apply Blau's workshop activities regularly, a process which, as Blau notes, "takes a step toward dismantling the top-down structure of the classroom," where "the students become valued experts because only they can know their own experience as readers engaged with the problems they encounter." In this sense, Blau's work is very much set up like the YNI seminar I participated in. All participants, including the teacher-facilitator(s), are co-learners in the workshop. There are a few strategies of Blau's that I have integrated, which I will outline in the successive paragraphs.

Reading Logs: Creating A Personal and Authentic Response

As mentioned earlier, much of what my students do revolves around independent selection and reading of texts appropriate to their current levels of reading readiness. Because I teach students who are at such varied grade level equivalents in reading, this approach has been best for engaging all readers. After each instance of independent reading (which is sustained, in class, for 20-30 minutes daily), students respond directly to the literature. The logs morph in format throughout the year, but often take a three-part approach, answering the questions noted above: 2) What does it (the text) say? 2) What does it mean? 3) Why does it matter?

In this unit, students will be responding to picture books and poems, though; so, one might wonder exactly how this will work. As a means of illustrating this example, I will refer to a page from Virginia Lee Burton's picture book *The Little House*.(23) This text is about an anthropomorphized house who is very happy living in the country. She (the house is feminine in her gender identity) becomes curious about the city but it is fairly removed from her daily life in the first third of the book. Then, the city begins to close in on the Little House. She becomes surrounded by markers of industry and is swallowed by the metropolis. I don't want to ruin the book's ending, but—suffice to say—Burton's depiction of urban life is not favorable.

I'd like to use this text in my unit, and think that the log audit format can guide them to the point of being able to make a similar response about a text. To begin—as I mentioned earlier in this paper—we'll start small: with a single image. The most striking image I noticed upon my re-reading of the book was located somewhere in the middle of the story. I'd set up the assignment (modeling my thinking for my students in the first-person) like this:

- **What does it say?***I see a picture of a city. The city seems endless: buildings tower over people. My eyes focus toward the top of the picture and then are pulled toward the middle, where a small house with broken windows and a boarded-up door is hidden. The city lights and night sky are in color. The house, most of the people, the train, and the cars are in charcoal.*
- **What does it mean?***It looks like the tall city buildings are swallowing the house. The house is almost unnoticeable at first. Is the author trying to comment on urban life in the early 1940s? Beginning in the mid-1860s and lasting through the turn of the next century, Americans moved en masse to cities. People continued to build up metropolitan areas until just after World War II, when white flight caused city centers to deteriorate. The Little House seems to be expressing (via her very human facial expressions) her displeasure with the state of American domesticity—preferring the quiet calm of the country to the hustle and bustle of the city.*
- **Why does it matter?***Burton's illustration matters because it expresses a certain attitude still held about cities (often reinforced by those who dwell in them). That idea is one that the city is a dark, dirty, unkind place to live. When I looked at this image, I focused so much on the house's dissatisfaction with her current situation. Could it be also that the house is commenting on the plight of the urban woman? After all, the author/illustrator clearly presents the Little House as female (by painting her pink—a*

feminine color). I am unsure what else to make of this image, but it seems like there is a lot going on in it.

(Blau and Peter Elbow alike refer to the unnecessary mandate many teachers give their students: "Do not use the word 'I' in your writing!" I like to model using the first-person singular because—as Blau rightly points out—students will have more success with writing if they can write as authentically as possible.)

The Literature Workshop also recommends that students complete periodic "audits" of their reading response logs, eventually forming rudimentary literary analysis essays. My colleagues and I have adapted this method beyond what Blau suggests to push our students farther in writing about specific literary devices or forms, and I plan to stick with this format of response in this unit.(24) The "audit" is divided into four sections: a description of a typical reading log entry (which Blau calls "A Brief Tour"); analysis of the length and quality of the logs as well as any observed changes over time; reflection on the act of writing the logs including an investigation of the perceived value of keeping such logs; and, finally, three or so exemplary log entries that best represent the student's overall content in his or her logs. The audit is, in many ways, a better-structured paper than students would write on their own and can turn into fuel for discussion or end-of-semester papers. In this unit, students will log their responses to picture books and poems after each reading (in logs kept separately from their independent reading logs). Then, they will complete one log audit at the end to examine the varied perspectives on urban life present in the content of the poems we explored as a class. As students read and respond in writing—daily—to poems, they will not only gain experience in practicing as interpreters; they will be able to see the diversity of urban landscape and human experience.

Shared Reading Experiences as a Means of Unlocking Meaning

Independent reading and response is only one means for interpretation. As noted earlier—Hirsch's recognition of the interpretative paradox (that one must break things apart in order to understand a whole object but that one must also understand the whole object in order to critically examine its parts) presents an interesting challenge. This type of critical, close reading—especially when done according to the method suggested in the successive paragraphs—also has the potential to do what is referred to as *defamiliarization* (making "the familiar strange and the strange familiar").(25) When working together, both students and teacher-facilitators alike can also learn a great deal. Democratic collaboration and exchange of ideas allows all members of the classroom community to work together to understand a challenging text. I will elaborate on this method and its activities further in the Classroom Activities section of this paper.

I realize I have drawn upon methods available to teachers from a fairly recent and accessible text, but I find them so compelling for replicating the kind of thinking promoted in my YNI seminar. In many ways, Sheridan Blau and Seminar Leader Paul Fry are suggesting the same thing: starting small and working toward larger understandings of texts.

Poetry Writing

This unit is also one where students will write their own poems about the city. Drawing upon Kenneth Koch's(26) work in teaching poetry to children, poetry reading and writing will be a part of our daily routine. Koch writes about his students: "Sometimes a child wrote a poem that showed a remarkable mastery of a particular poet's way of seeing and experiencing things." I see that as akin to interpretation. A poem is simply an interpretation of an idea, a moment, a person—the subject. Broadening students' horizons of what interpretation is, then, seems healthy. We will break apart the idea of interpretation in order to put it back together in whole-class discussions.

We will experiment in mimicking the form of each day's poem— from Richard Wright's haiku to Claude McKay's rhyming couplets in "Subway Wind." Each time, students will be expected to use urban images or signifiers of urban life in their poetry, all while working within the form. In total, students will write anywhere between five and seven poems that evoke a sense of place. Those poems can be worked into Reading Logs if peers exchange work and read their partners' writing.

Paideia Seminars

Just this year, my co-teachers and I adapted discussion in our classes to draw upon *The Paideia Classroom*.⁽²⁷⁾ The Paideia seminar is a structured method of inquiry and discussion that can, ultimately, force students to ask and answer questions that one would expect in higher-level high school or collegiate courses. It is not unlike the Socratic Seminar method, but is an easy one to teach to students, gradually releasing the responsibility for discussion preparedness and leadership onto the students. As teachers, my co-teachers and I simply monitor and facilitate these seminars. Student discussion is more uneven at the freshman level, but I believe if it is based on shorter texts and scaffolded up— as it will be in this unit— student discussion will also approach a more critical level. I will elaborate on this method more in the Classroom Activities section of this paper.

By combining this approach with the Literature Workshop and enhancing them with my new knowledge about hermeneutics, I believe I have designed a comprehensive unit that will engage students in college-ready reading and response to literature. Furthermore, I have provided students with both a forum and a format for exploring the unit's essential questions and themes.

Activities

Sample Literature Workshop In Action: Shared Reading with "We Real Cool"

Each day, students will engage in Literature Workshop activities, usually with the same task: determining and defending whether or not a given poem is explicitly urban. They will read a poem from the suggested poems list (either individually, in a small group, or with the entire class) and then begin to write interpretations using the reading log model. For some works, such as Gwendolyn Brooks' "We Real Cool,"⁽²⁸⁾ it might make sense to do a shared reading. The poem isn't explicitly urban (it does not contain the word "city" in it once, nor does it bear any specific place names or markers), but it is possible that—given their associations with pool halls, "sin," and/or people who "lurk late," student readers might draw parallels between Brooks' poem and their own urban lives. Once the poem has been made unfamiliar—or strange—students might be in a better frame of mind to assess the poem's urban qualities.

A shared reading of the text will begin with the teacher-facilitator reading the text out loud once. Then, any unknown words will be defined. (In the case of "We Real Cool," the word "thin" usually needs explanation, as Brooks writes: "We thin⁽²⁹⁾ gin.") Once we have defined all necessary words, we will move into our text "remix." Students will begin calling out words or phrases one at a time—making space for others as they feel compelled—"We" / "Sin" / "Lurk late"—repeating any words or phrases as much as they desire. With a text so short, it is possible that the activity could fade away after just one minute.

The real magic comes in having students write a story that comes to mind after this free association activity.

Maybe the story will be urban in nature; maybe it won't be. Simply ask students to pick a few words or a line from the poem. Then, instruct them to write silently and without hesitation for at least five minutes. This will build students' writing stamina, and it will also allow them to draw out whatever hidden meanings they think the text has based on their initial readings (and initial interpretations) of the text. Once students pair share and compare, they should have sufficient evidence to answer a whole-class question: Is this poem an "urban" poem? After engaging in such an activity, the strange becomes familiar again and students' perceptions of city life are expanded.

Poetry Writing in the Style of Richard Wright

Students will continue to explore creative interpretations of their urban locations by writing poems. This writing won't happen every day, but it will occur often enough that students get a sense of poetic devices and form. Koch writes that, though a poem might be difficult for a student to comprehend, once they have worked through it under the guidance of a master reader, they will be ready to think about the way the language is structured. In Richard Wright's urban haiku(30)—for example—the students will likely notice the odd arrangement of words (a careful arrangement of seventeen syllables split into lines of five, seven, and five syllables in that order).

Then, they will notice the juxtaposition, at times, of images that are urban and yet not—a skyscraper and "the spring sea," for example.(31) After discussing and digesting Wright's haiku, they will try their hands at writing their own. We will have generated a list of what "urban" is or means earlier in the unit. I'll have saved those words and/or phrases to use as topics for poems. As instructors, my co-teaching partner and I will write along with the students and model adherence to the basic form of five, seven, and five syllables. Lets pretend the topic is "streets." I might write:

A sidewalk crack forms The dandelion: bursting through— Beautiful mistake

Or:

The *elotero*: Slings corn for the masses on my street corner.

The two haiku above take on the same general subject in two different ways. They can be interpreted on a literal level or on a more metaphorical one. For example—the dandelion may be representative of public art in blighted areas of the city; and, the *elotero* (one who sells Mexican-style corn on the cob) is both a legitimate street vendor and representative of the pervasiveness of drugs in some Chicago communities. I'd love to guide my students toward recognizing the complexities in their communities. With Wright's and teacher-created haiku as models, students should be able to get there. These interpretations of city life provide students the opportunity to express themselves—to become visible— and will add depth to class discussions in subsequent lessons.

Week One Paideia Seminar: H.D.'s "Cities" and Virginia Lee Burton's *The Little House*

This unit is designed to honor students' intellectual abilities and curiosities. To this end, student-centered discussion (rather than only didactic instruction) is a key component. In a Paideia seminar, discussion is democratic and—eventually—mostly driven by students. Teachers must model and define good discussion behaviors (reading/preparedness, listening, use of evidence/reasoning, leadership, and conduct) and provide a structure for discussion. By participating in such seminars, students become empowered to take interpretative risks and think critically—as they will at the end of Week One, thinking about H.D.'s poem "Cities" and Virginia

Lee Burton's *The Little House*.

In the beginning, teachers facilitate this discussion by developing three types of questions to discuss: opening, core, and closing. Eventually, in my classes, I have students develop their own questions using stems aligned to each question type. Opening questions are general, open-ended, and invite students to participate using familiar ideas; in a literature-focused seminar, they are usually geared toward discussing the text's main idea and/or examining the author's approach. Core questions are the most specific kinds of questions; in a seminar focused on poetry, students would be asked to examine a given line or phrase, for example. Finally, closing questions are reflective and invite participants to make the types of connections teachers call "text-to-self" or "text-to-world."

In this first seminar, the adults in the room (my co-teaching partner and I, in my case) will take an active role in the facilitation. By the end of the unit, students will be developing the questions and keeping one another in check. The discussion, which will last an entire class period, can be adapted for any bell schedule structure. I suggest, though, adhering to the following ratio for seminar structure: 10% of the class focused on goal-setting and reflection before and after seminar (See Appendix 1) and 90% of the class discussing equal parts of opening, core, and closing questions. See Appendix 2 for a list of sample questions for this first seminar.

Unit Closing: Poetry Chapbook

By the end of the unit, I'd like my students to create class chapbooks of poetry about the city they live in. They will write short reflective essays to accompany them that articulate their own interpretations of urban life and how their interpretations were informed by the poetry we read in this unit.

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Sandburg, Carl. *Poems of the Midwest: Containing Two Complete Volumes: Chicago Poems, and Cornhuskers*. Cleveland: World Pub. Co., 1946. The first half of this text includes portraits of individuals and images of moments in Chicago city life. The accompanying photographs enhance the text and provide context for Sandburg's work.

Wright, Richard. *Haiku: This Other World*, ed. Yoshinobu Hakutani, and Robert L. Tener. New York: Arcade Pub. 1998. Several of the haiku in this collection call to mind an urban experience—often contrasted with some sort of natural imagery.

Appendix 1

Paideia Seminar Goal-Setting and Reflection Tool

Name: _____ Seminar Date: _____ Period: _____

BEFORE SEMINAR – GOAL SETTING

What to do: *Respond to the following prompts independently, writing in complete sentences.*

1. Think about the way in which you have prepared for today's seminar. Write down three things you have done to prepare (example: I re-read my Poetry Logs from this week).

- a.
- b.
- c.

2. To ensure you meet standards or better, what is one goal you have for your participation in today's seminar? How will you hold yourself accountable?

AFTER SEMINAR – REFLECTION

What to do: *Check the box below that best describes your participation in today's seminar. Then, elaborate on your rating by writing complete sentences on the lines that follow.*

1: I did not participate in today's seminar, or I hindered others' learning today.	
2: I attempted to meet standards, but did not succeed in all areas.	
3: I met standards by coming to class prepared for the seminar, participating respectfully, and using evidence to back up my responses.	
4: I exceeded standards by meeting the criteria for a "3" and taking on a leadership role to ensure compassionate, democratic participation.	

Appendix 2

Sample Seminar Questions for Week One: "Cities" and *The Little House*

Opening Questions 1. What would be another good title for *The Little House*?

2. What one word is most important in each text: "Cities?" and *The Little House*?

3. Do you think that the authors of these two texts would agree or disagree with this statement: *A city is an excellent place in which to grow up and live* ?

Core Questions 1. What does the Little House have in common with the speaker in "Cities"? What is different about the two narrative perspectives?

2. Who might the "he" in H.D.'s "Cities" be? Explain, with evidence.

3. Do you agree or disagree with The Little House's view of the city? Why?

Closing Questions

1. If you were the woman at the end of *The Little House*, what would you do with the house?

2. What do these two texts assume about cities? Have they opened your minds to new perspectives on city life? Explain.

3. What was the most important thing we discussed or learned during this seminar?

Appendix 3

Common Core Language Arts Standards Addressed in This Unit

Reading Literature RL.9-10.1: Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text

RL.9-10.7: Analyze the representation of a subject or key scene in two different artistic mediums, including what is emphasized or absent in each treatment.

Speaking and Listening SL.9-10.1: Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

Writing W.9-10.9: Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

W.9-10.10: Write routinely over extended time frames (time for research, reflection, and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of tasks, purposes, and audiences.

Notes

1. Sandburg, Carl. "Chicago Poems." Poetry, March 1914. <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/> (accessed July 17, 2013).

2. This term is a colloquial one, although one of the earliest uses of this term—according to my friend, *Complex Magazine* staff writer David Drake—is likely by Chicago rapper Louis Johnson (aka King Louie) on his 2011 mixtape *Chiraq Drillinois*.

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4. *Ibid.*

5. Rich, Adrienne. "Diving Into the Wreck." In *Diving Into the Wreck: Poems 1971 - 1972*. Reiss. Norton paperback ed. New York: Norton, 1994.

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7. *Ibid.*

8. Shakespeare, William. "Act 2, Scene 2." In *Hamlet*. 1600. Reprint, Madison, WI: Cricket House Books, 2012. Lines 236-37.

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13. Perrine, Laurence. "The Nature of Proof in the Interpretation of Poetry." *The English Journal* September (1962): 393-98 <http://www.en.utexas.edu/Classes/Bremen/e316k/316kprivate/scans/perrine.html> (accessed July 8, 2013).

14. ISAT is an acronym that stands for Illinois Standard Achievement Test, which measures students' reading, mathematics, and science achievement. Students take this test in grades three through eight; however eighth grade is the last year in which students must hit specific achievement benchmarks in order to qualify for promotion.

15. Jaco, Ayesha, perf. "Ayesha Says." *Food and Liquor II: The Great American Rap Album Part 1*. Lupe Fiasco. 2012. MP3.

16. "Ethnoscape" is defined as "The landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live: tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles, guestworkers, and other moving groups and persons constitute an essential feature of the world," in Appadurai, Arjun. "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy." www.intcul.tohoku.ac.jp/~holden/MediatedSociety/Readings/2003_04/Appadurai.html (accessed July 16, 2013).

17. Sandburg, Carl. "Chicago Poems." *Poetry*, March 1914. <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/> (accessed July 17, 2013).

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21. Blau, Sheridan D. *The Literature Workshop: Teaching Texts and Their Readers*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2003.
22. I am also very much indebted to Julie Price Daly, a colleague who is a literacy coach with the University of Chicago's Network for College Success. Julie was instrumental in developing the model of reading intervention used in the network of schools in which I teach and has been an invaluable coach as I have developed my practice as a teacher of reading.
23. Burton, Virginia Lee. *The Little House*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin co., 1942.
24. In particular, I am indebted to the work of Phillips Academy High School teacher Dr. Leah Guenther whose adaptation of Sheridan Blau's Reading Log Audit I have used so heavily.
25. I have seen this attributed to Russian Formalist Viktor Shklovsky; but, I am fairly certain sure someone else said it before him. Shklovsky is credited for coining the term *defamiliarization* in his 1925 essay "Art as Technique."
26. Koch, Kenneth. *Rose, Where Did You Get That Red? Teaching Great Poetry to Children*. 1st ed. New York: Random House, 1973.
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28. Books, Gwendolyn. "'We Real Cool'." *Poetry*, September 1959. <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/> (accessed July 17, 2013).
29. The idea of "thinning" gin is commonly accepted as diluting gin with water, or—as Paul Fry has suggested—possibly with cheaper, yet more lethal grain alcohol. Either way, students have to move beyond the literal into a more figurative interpretation of the word.
30. Wright's urban haiku so often contain these contrasting images that they are referred to as "senryu"—short poems, often dark or satirical, that are usually focused on humanity rather than on the natural world of haiku.
31. Wright, Richard. *Haiku: This Other World*, ed. Richard, Yoshinobu Hakutani, and Robert L. Tener. New York: Arcade Pub. :, 1998. Wright wrote an extensive collection of haiku during the last two years of his life. A small portion of his haiku can be found in this book. The Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University holds a more expansive collection of the poetry—most never published—along with a collection of manuscripts, letters, photographs, and other items from Wright's estate.

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