



YALE NATIONAL INITIATIVE

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Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative
2013 Volume III: John L. Gaddis, Professor of History

From Narratives to Biography: Who will listen to their stories?

Curriculum Unit 13.03.04, published September 2013

by Terry Anne Wildman

Introduction

1. It's what you do when you think no one's looking that tells us what kind of person you really are.(1)

Most elementary students begin their school careers enjoying story time. Fairy tales, mysteries, folk tales, and fantasy fascinate them, especially stories with pictures! Writing for these kindergarten through third graders reflects these genres and they enjoy writing. The problem comes once they have "graduated" to the upper elementary grades. The new Common Core curriculum for these grades has greatly increased the percentage of time spent each quarter on non-fiction reading and writing. For some students, this exposure to non-fiction is celebrated, as a new world of information is now available to them. For other students, a palpable groan can be heard when they see another non-fiction assignment for the week introduced. Now imagine how loud these groans are when students are asked to write non-fiction!

This unit seeks to explore ways to engage fourth grade students in writing biography, memoir, narratives, and autobiography. Students usually enjoy writing about themselves so they will experience this form of writing as a segue into writing narrative and biography. They will be exposed to fugitive slave narratives that shock and amaze to elicit conversation and wonder. By engaging students in this way, I intend for them to develop an appreciation of non-fiction writing as a genre that is not intimidating and/or too difficult to comprehend and enjoy. In the writing process, they will also gain some insights into who they really are as an evolving learner.

Rationale

The Pennsylvania State Standardized Assessments in the spring of 2012 for our fourth graders showed a raw reading score of 46.5%. Each year we look for ways to improve our students reading and writing in the classroom. We use many strategies and activities, which provide diverse experiences using various genres. We find that students usually write at the same level that they read so improving both is a way of reinforcing these skills. We know that students will want to learn if they are interested and engaged in their learning.

I would like to take advantage of this five-year commemoration of the 150th Anniversary of the Civil War to have my students read and write non-fiction, including narratives and biography. Most students have heard of President Lincoln, Frederick Douglass, and Harriet Tubman during Black History month and on President's Day. I would like to expose my students to the not so famous fugitive slaves who were courageous and passionate about their freedom and the freedom of others.

In the 1930s, various government agencies initiated work programs across the country to provide jobs for the unemployed. One of the projects that the Library of Congress undertook was a collection of black folk histories entitled, *SlaveNarratives*. Field workers were sent out to find stories of ex-slaves, mostly in the South, by asking a list of questions devised for the project. As tape recorders had not yet been invented, the answers had to be written in long hand. When typed and submitted to the agency these came to ten thousand typed pages, representing approximately two thousand voices. These stories range from severe beatings and abject poverty to kind and generous masters who looked out for their "possessions". But these were not the first slave narratives. Students will learn that fugitive slaves were writing about their experiences even in the nineteenth century. Although dangerous, these activities changed the general public's thinking about the question of slavery in America.

"The question, 'Who will speak?' is less crucial than 'Who will listen?'"(2) It is just as important today that we listen to these stories, the stories of those who risked their lives to fight for freedom, for themselves and for others. By using stories from many of my students' ancestors, I hope to engage them in critical thinking and writing skills.

Using narratives to write about who they are and why they act in given situations allows my students to get to the heart of writing. Teachers often lament the writing students hand in, including "shopping list" accounts of experiences and stories lacking any descriptive words. My students will explore strategies for writing autobiographical accounts of important events in their life. They will be exposed to biography by reading different forms of biography, including graphic biography, to discuss how each story focuses on different aspects of a subject's life. They will explore strategies for writing biography by interviewing peers and family members to understand time, space and scale.

Demographics

I have been teaching fourth grade in the School District of Philadelphia for eight years. My elementary school has about 275 students serving kindergarten through fifth grade, which will change next year to include sixth grade. Our students comprise the following ethnicity groups: 94.6% African American, 0.4% white, 0.8% Latino, 0.4% American Indian, and 3.9% listed as other. Students in this elementary school are from low-income families with 94.7% receiving free lunch (2012 figures). I find from year to year that about 50% of my students receive support from their families including volunteering at school, following up on suggested strategies for improving reading at home, and helping their child with homework and needed supplies. Currently our students receive training in computer technology, library skills, and music. The building does not have a gym or auditorium to hold physical education classes or assemblies for the whole school.

Background/Content

History of Slavery

Dana Rush wrote that American and European traders between the fifteenth and nineteenth century purchased an estimated 11 to 12 million slaves in Africa. Eighty percent of these slaves left the coast of Africa between 1700 and 1850. Studies of the Atlantic slave trade show approximately 35,000 voyages from Africa to the Americas from 1514 to 1866 confirming North America as a minor destination for transatlantic slavers. Scholars now believe that slavery may not have begun in 1619 with the arrival of twenty slaves to Jamestown, Virginia but at an earlier time period. Dylan Penningroth wrote that he tells his students that "only 3 percent of all the slaves who left Africa ended up in the United States, but that by 1860, the U.S. had 4 million slaves - the biggest slave population in the New World".(3) North America was considered a "minor" destination compared to countries along the Atlantic slave trade because by the 1800s, it firmly established the "peculiar institution" of slavery. This system, where slaves were employed in fields and homes, was hereditary and permanent. Whereas West Indies plantations owners worked their slaves to an early death in the sugar cane industry, North American slave owners advanced slavery as a benevolent institution. Procreation was encouraged once the slave trade ended in 1808, and with the proper care and training, slaves could live a peaceful and productive life.

During the Revolutionary Era, slavery came to a halting end in the North, but in the South the slave society expanded explosively. Slaveholders became the seat of political power due to the cotton revolution, which would bring wealth not only to the southern slave owners but also to northern merchants, mill owners, and bankers. In the 1830s, Americans started referring to slavery as "the peculiar institution" because as slavery was diminishing around the Western Hemisphere, it was portrayed in the South as a good system, in which the southern plantation was "a school constantly training and controlling pupils who were in a backward state of civilization".(4)

Scholars today ask to what extent enslaved people were active agents in shaping their own lives. Early historians portrayed the enslaved as essentially passive and grateful recipients of their master's kindness and generosity. We now know that this was not true. Rebellions, although small, did happen even before the famous Nat Turner insurrection of August 1831, where he led four accomplices on a three-day rampage through Southampton, Virginia murdering every white person along the way. His "army" swelled to approximately 70 slave rebels and in the end more than 100 blacks and 57 white people were killed. Turner survived but was executed in November 1831. We also know that slaves were rebelling and freeing themselves by refusing to work, breaking tools, damaging crops, and running away. Many would make it north to free states and into Canada where they would be free from slave catchers, who were given carte blanche to recapture slaves after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850.

Slave Narratives

To justify slavery in their own minds, slave owners made an effort to show people in America that they were indeed helping lowly slaves by teaching them through work and discipline how to become "civilized". They frequently used Christian religious tenets and the Bible to justify their behavior. Without their benevolent support, these "creatures" would remain barbaric, unable to evolve into fully functioning people in a civilized world. The plantation became the "school" in which the slave owner, through his "good intentions", would lift slaves' condition so that they could lead a happy life.

With the rise of the abolitionist movement beginning with the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society in 1831, fugitive slave narratives became an important vehicle for changing Northern views of slavery. Considered the first black autobiographies, the slave narratives portray exciting and dangerous events in the long journey for freedom. They have a unique structure (preface, testimonials, and postscripts written by white abolitionists and editors); the main element of this pattern is the character's search for freedom and his desire to bring freedom to his fellow sufferers. The narrator's goal is to establish a relationship with listeners and readers to develop trust and veracity as a legitimate autobiographer.

A word about attestations is appropriate here. Phillis Wheatley's book, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* would not have been published but for eighteen of Boston's most notable citizens who summoned her to a "hearing" to see if she indeed could possibly have written such beautiful poetry. Publication of her poems would not happen unless an attestation was given because people would suspect that she was not the author. From the sixteenth century, Europeans had wondered whether Africans could ever master "the arts and sciences". "If they could, the argument ran, then the African variety of humanity was fundamentally related to the European variety. If not, then it seemed clear that the African was destined by nature to be a slave".(5) Wheatley's book was published in London in 1773 with a document testifying that she was the author. Slave narratives that would follow included similar "proofs" of authorship that were required by most publishers to assure readers that the accounts were true and written by the narrator.

Although this is not a discussion of religion or religious values, many narrators, in the same vein as St. Augustine's *Confessions*, present themselves as a spiritual character shifting back and forth between experiences in life and expositions of Christian doctrine. Ever mindful of their audience and the evangelical movement of the late Eighteenth century, the Bible provided a crucial source of the language of liberation and was used in many narratives, including those of slaves.

These narratives exposed the evils of Southern plantation life. Abolitionists had been writing and speaking about the horrors of slavery, but the narratives would provide the evidence that they needed to convince others. In the early Nineteenth Century, slave narratives emphasized the depravity of Southern planters, the irrepressible fact of sexual miscegenation, the hypocrisy of Southern Christianity, the scenes of brutal beatings and torture, and rebellious slaves who were murdered. Many narratives included letters or statements from white businessmen, lawyers, and organizations verifying the legitimacy of the narrative: these countered claims by Southern plantation owners that the stories were fraudulent. It was often dangerous for the narrator to include specific details including names of people and places because of fear of being forced back into slavery and/or fear of family members being sold and sent further south. There were also questions about the actual writing of the narrative. How could a fugitive slave, who had never learned how to read and write, produce such well-written accounts of their experiences?

Harriet Jacobs

Harriet Jacobs escaped to the North in 1842 but she would not tell anyone of her experiences as a slave until she had lived there for ten years and became a free woman. Her abolitionist friend, Amy Post, upon hearing her story, tried to persuade her to publish her accounts. After her grandmother's death, Harriet finally decided to write her experiences but chose the pseudonym Linda Brent because of the nature of her story. She was originally determined not to tell anyone of her past, possibly because of her sexual history and her grandmother's disapproval of her actions. Harriet's relationship with her grandmother was extremely complicated and she never really excused or pardoned Harriet's behavior.

Harriet was born about 1813 in Edenton, North Carolina. She was the granddaughter of Molly Horniblow, who

was the slave of Elizabeth Horniblow. Although Harriet was born a slave, she was allowed to live with her parents, Elijah and Delilah, until her mother died when she was six years old. Later when Elizabeth Horniblow died, Harriet who was twelve years old, expected to be freed, but instead was willed to Horniblow's three-year-old niece, where she was sexually harassed by her father, Dr. James Norcom. At sixteen, in a desperate attempt to ward off his sexual advances, she became pregnant by Samuel T. Sawyer, a young white attorney and neighbor of the Norcoms. Because Harriet would not tell anyone who the father was, Mrs. Norcom assumed it was Dr. Norcom and threw her out of the house. Although Harriet's grandmother condemned her for her actions, she eventually took pity but never forgave her. Harriet would have two children with Sawyer, a son, Benjamin and a daughter, Ellen.

After a time Dr. Norcom began suggesting that Harriet's children would be sold if she did not bend to his wishes. She knew she would have to run away to keep this from happening. At this point, her children were living in town with Molly. Her first plan was to conceal herself at a friend's house and hide there until the search was over. Then she would find passage north. She hoped that after awhile, Norcom would consent to sell Harriet and her children for fear of losing value on his property to Mr. Sawyer. Molly was not happy and fearful for Harriet's life, but was unable to change her mind.

A three hundred dollar reward was posted by Dr. Norcom for an intelligent, bright, mulatto girl. Harriet received help from an unnamed lady who hid her in a closet. In the meantime, Mr. Sawyer tried to buy Harriet's children and brother through a third party. He eventually succeeded and they were returned to Molly's house. After a few weeks, Harriet realized that she could not stay in the closet any more and left disguised in a suit of sailor's clothes. She was taken to a vessel with two other fugitives but after hiding in swamps for a couple of days, she was taken back to her grandmother's house because she became so ill from the swamps.

Harriet would spend the next seven years hiding in the attic of a small shed added on to the back of her grandmother's house. She described this "garret" as only nine feet long and seven feet wide. The highest part was three feet high, with no ventilation or light. A trap door was fashioned in a cabinet during the time she was in hiding in the neighbor's closet. She described the room:

A bed had been spread on the floor. I could sleep quite comfortably on one side; but the slope was so sudden that I could not turn on the other without hitting the roof. The rats and mice ran over my bed; but I was weary, and I slept such sleep as the wretched may, when a tempest has passed over them. Morning came. I knew it only by the noises I heard; for in my small den day and night were all the same. I suffered for air even more than for light. But I was not comfortless. I heard the voices of my children.(6)

Harriet described how food was passed up to her at night. Sometimes her Uncle Phillip, Aunt Nancy, or grandmother would chat with her, but never during the day. It was impossible for her to move into an erect position so she would crawl around the room for exercise. Insects tormented her and in the winters her shoulders and feet were frostbitten. Of course, Dr. Norcom would stop by and ask the family if they had heard any news about Harriet, even offering her children trinkets if they would tell him where she was.

After five years, Ellen was sent to Washington and Harriet was allowed to spend some time with her the night before she left. She was heartbroken when her daughter left but this only strengthened her resolve to escape to freedom. Well into her sixth year of hiding, Harriet's friend Peter found a chance for her to escape by boat to Philadelphia. She was able to spend time with her son Benjamin before she left, and she found out that he had known for quite some time that she was hiding above the storeroom. When asked how he knew, he said

he was near the storeroom one day and heard a cough and knew it was Harriet. He kept it a secret and would often steer people, including Dr. Norcum, from getting too close. Harriet promised Benjamin that they would all live together in the North one day as soon as Uncle Phillip could make the arrangements.

When she finally escaped, Harriet was reunited with her daughter Ellen in New York and worked for a kind family, whom she called Mr. and Mrs. Bruce. She eventually traveled to England for ten months to speak about her experiences as a slave, where she said that she "never saw the slightest symptom of prejudice against color"(7) and had entirely forgotten about it until she returned home. Upon her return to America, the first Mrs. Bruce died and Harriet was asked to return to New York to help the new Mrs. Bruce and their children. Harriet was afraid to return due to the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, which stated that fugitive slaves could be taken back into slavery if found in free states. The Bruces bought her freedom for three hundred dollars, which Harriet first objected to saying that she "despise(s) the miscreant who demanded payment for what never rightfully belonged to him or his".(8) Her story ends with joy and sorrow – joy that she and her children were finally free and sorrow because her grandmother and uncle passed away soon after she gained her freedom.

Francis Fedric

Francis Fedric ran away several times before he was able to escape to freedom in Canada. His first attempt, hiding in a swamp at Bear Wallow for nine weeks, was his most famous. He was born Francis Parker in Fauquier County, Virginia around 1805. His mother was brought from Africa to Maryland and then purchased by a man named Parker. She had nine children, two boys and seven girls, but Francis did not mention them in his narrative until contemplating his escape. The soil in Virginia was gradually impoverished and the Parkers moved west in search for better land. During the nineteenth century, approximately 200,000 white settlers and 40,000 slaves migrated along with William and Richard Parker, who moved with their mother to Mason County, Kentucky. The slaves cleared the land, fenced it, and planted bluegrass for the cattle to graze. They built log cabins for the new slaves that would be needed to work the tobacco farms. At around sixteen, Francis became a house slave and was trained to wait at table, cook, and take messages to neighbors to call on his mistress.

When Richard passed away, his son Addison S. Parker took over the farm. He was a gambler and a drunkard, who became vicious when drunk and attacked household and field slaves with no provocation. During this time Francis became interested in the Christian religion and found his master's beating intolerable given the religion the family professed to follow. Parker did not allow his slaves to travel to visit family and friends on their own time as other slave owners were known to do. One night Francis decided to go to a meeting among slaves in a neighboring plantation and waited until his master fell asleep. The next morning, he was called to the tree behind the kitchen where Parker was in the habit of tying up his victims and flogging them, and Francis decided to run away. (This daytime, spur of the moment escape is unusual). He hid in bushes and made his way to Bear Wallow, about eighteen miles from his farm, where he stayed in a recess under a high overhanging rock at the side or foot of a hill. This swamp area ran about nine miles either way and was scoured out each month by farmers and their friends to drive back the wolves and bears.

He described his hiding place with whip-poor-will's doleful cries, frogs of every species croaking all night, and innumerable reptiles "joining in wild concert".(9) He continued:

(T)he blowing snake with many others did not care to conceal themselves from my sight, their tameness was frightful to me from the first night or two. I felt no way disposed to a reclining posture among such multitudinous company, but nature soon required this indulgence, and my neighbors were emboldened to still greater familiarities; one would run right across me from one

side to the other, one would lie still leaving his tail or his head partially on me, another would lie right across me as if to enjoy the full benefits of the comfort my body might afford as a bed.(10)

Francis lived in this swamp for nine weeks, going out each day to try and find food. Hunger drove him to seek help from Mr. Wm. Brush, a Methodist preacher, who he asked to speak to Parker on his behalf. He was received into Brush's home but not given any food as it was against the law to feed a fugitive slave. Brush said he would bring Francis back (nineteen miles away) provided he would kneel at his master's feet and beg his pardon for attempting to escape. When they arrived, Brush told Parker that he promised Francis he would not be whipped if he asked for pardon. Parker agreed until about a month later, when he announced to Francis that it was time to settle accounts. He was whipped 107 times with a cowhide and it was two months before he could work again.

Francis never stopped thinking about escaping and one night after Parker heard he had been to a prayer meeting, Parker, who was "tipsy", gave Francis 215 lashes. Francis asked his readers how a slave would know how many lashes they received and he wrote "those who stood by used to count them and tell it to the one who had received the lashes".(11) Friends eventually came to his aid and through the Underground Railroad, he was able to escape to Canada. He changed his name to Fedric (sometime written Fredric), met an English woman who he married, and moved to England in 1857 for a few years. His first narrative was written in 1859; the second of his three narratives was written in England in 1863. Fedric moved back to America, without his wife, and lived in Baltimore, Maryland.

Henry Brown

Henry Brown became known as Henry "Box" Brown after successfully escaping to Philadelphia in a very unusual and dangerous way. He was born enslaved in Louisa County, Virginia in 1815. He was sent to Richmond to work in a tobacco family where he met his wife, Nancy, at a neighboring plantation. They had three children together and in 1848, while his wife was carrying their fourth child, he found out that Nancy and his three children were sold to a plantation in North Carolina. He wrote about watching helplessly while 350 slaves in chains walked by him, including his wife and children.

Henry was a member of the First African Baptist Church and a choir singer. He wrote that after experiencing severe family affliction, "...and the knowledge that these cruelties were perpetrated by ministers and church members, I began strongly to suspect the Christianity of the slave-holding church members and hesitated much about maintaining, my connection with them".(12) He enlisted the help of a friend in his choir to carry out his unusual plan.

While at work one day, an idea "suddenly flashed across my mind of shutting myself up in a box, and getting myself conveyed as dry goods to a free state".(13) He went to his friend Dr. Samuel Alexander Smith who at first did not think Henry could live in a box for so long a time but eventually agreed to help him. Next Henry got the help of a carpenter who built a wooden box three feet long, two feet eight inches deep and two feet wide. The box was lined with baize, a course woolen cloth, and a hole was cut into the box for breathing. Henry brought a bladder of water and some biscuits for the trip that would take 27 hours. He was thrown and left upside down on his head even though the box was labeled "This Side Up". The box left Richmond on the morning of March 29, 1849, and arrived in Philadelphia, some 350 miles north, 27 hours later. Unfortunately, he was placed in a depot with other luggage until seven p.m. on March 30th, when James Miller McKim, a member of the Philadelphia Anti-Slavery Society, had the box brought to his home. Henry described the scene when the box was opened:

A number of persons soon collected round the box after it was taken in to the house, but as I did not know what was going on I kept myself quiet. I heard a man say, "Let us rap upon the box and see if he is alive"; and immediately a rap ensued and a voice said, tremblingly, "Is all right within?" to which I replied - "All right."(14)

Charles Stearns first published Henry's narrative in September 1849 in Boston. After appearing at Anti-Slavery Conventions, he became a performer often reciting the psalm he had sung when he first emerged from the box. He would use the box to show how he fit inside during his long journey. With the passing of the Fugitive Slave Act, Henry too traveled to England in 1850, where his own "First English Edition" of the narrative was published in Manchester. Once he left the abolition circuit due to criticism for not purchasing his family, he went into show business and in 1859 he married and had a daughter named Annie. He returned to the United States in 1875 and continued to climb into his original box as part of his act throughout the eastern United States. His last act was reported to have taken place in Brantford, Ontario, Canada. There is no known information on his date of death or burial place.

Ellen and William Craft

Ellen met William once she moved to Macon, Georgia. Ellen's mother was biracial and her father was her mother's slave master. This created a problem because Ellen was so "light skinned" that she was often confused with the master's other children. At eleven years of age, Ellen's mistress decided to "gift" her to her daughter in Georgia. There William and Ellen fell in love but at first they did not want to get married until they found a way to freedom. They did not want to bring children into the world of slavery. They tried to devise a plan for their escape but the 1000 miles to freedom was a daunting endeavor.

In 1846, the couple finally decided to marry with the approval of their slave owners. They continued to look for ways to escape and in 1848 they concocted a plan. Ellen would disguise herself as an invalid white man who was traveling north with his slave to seek medical attention in Philadelphia. At first Ellen thought it would be impossible to assume that disguise for 1,000 miles through slave country. But she eventually agreed as her desire for freedom outweighed her fear of getting caught. Because they could not read or write, Ellen was very concerned about traveling so many miles using various means to get to their destination. They would not be able to read signs or register for the rooms, trains, and vessels they would use for the trip. Ellen then came up with the idea to bind her right hand so that she would have to ask officers to register her name for her. This turned out to be a brilliant plan.

It took time for William to purchase the pieces of Ellen's disguise. He was able to buy everything but the pants, which Ellen ended up sewing. They both received passes to travel during the Christmas holiday and with much consternation, they started out by night. They travelled to Savannah by train, where William saw his owner at the station looking into the cars. He found out later that his owner had a suspicion that William might be escaping but he did not see him there. They continued to Charleston, South Carolina by steamer, where Ellen, as master, dined with other gentlemen. William wrote that conversation among gentlemen in first-class circles in the South centered around three things - "Niggers, Cotton, and the Abolitionists."(15)

Once in Charleston, Ellen was taken to the John C. Calhoun, the best hotel in Charleston. William did not say how they got the funds for the hotel and transportation, but they both probably saved money for years. They hoped to take a steamer to Philadelphia from Charleston, but found out that vessels did not run through the winter. Fortunately, William found tickets on a steamer to Wilmington, North Carolina but it was at this point that closer scrutiny was paid to anyone bringing slaves with them to the North. Ellen had to register her name and the name of her slave and was, of course, unable to do so. An officer on the steamer from Savannah

vouched for them and they continued on. Next they took a train for Richmond, Virginia where Ellen met a family with two young daughters. When asked, Ellen told the father that he (Ellen) suffered from inflammatory rheumatism, which the father, taking sympathy, offered Ellen a recipe for "his" symptoms.

They continued onto Washington D.C. and arrived in Baltimore by train. Baltimore was the last slave port before reaching Philadelphia. They were stopped again and Ellen was asked for proof of ownership of her slave. Not being able to produce any, they feared that they would be caught and returned to Georgia. When Ellen asked the officer at the station why he wished to see her, he told her that if any man should take a slave to Philadelphia who was not the rightful owner and the proper master came and proved that he was the rightful owner of the slave, the railroad then had to pay for the slave. After telling the officer he (Ellen) did not have anyone who could endorse him, an officer on the train they had just stepped off of attested that they did come by train from Washington but that was all he was willing to confirm. Fortunately, the bell rang for the train to leave and the officer decided to let them go due to Ellen's unfortunate condition.

William's narrative ended here but we know that the Crafts quickly moved to Boston. They too feared being re-enslaved following the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act and then moved to England where they would go to school for three years in Surrey and raise five children. They staged a demonstration at the London Great Exhibition against American slavery in June 1851. They returned to Georgia in 1870 where they built the Woodville Co-operative Farm School to educate freed slaves. In 1890, they moved to Charleston to live with one of their daughters and remained there until Ellen died in 1891 and William followed her in 1900.

The Art of Biography

Why biography? Biography as a genre has gotten kicked around over the last two centuries. Traditional historians say it is a lame attempt at writing history while novelists say it is a lame attempt at writing a novel. When we write biography (or autobiography), we tell our own story or see ourselves in someone else's; we step inside a subject's private world and try to make sense of their behavior and decisions. We bring to the reader an individual's story in the midst of great events thereby creating a more holistic picture of these events. We find, as biographer, our place in the world as we each seek meaning and purpose. In discovering the foibles and warts of great people (for whom biography is written), we discover how similar and different they are from ourselves. They are taken off the pedestal or placed higher on the pedestal while we dissect each layer of the subject's life. "Every great man has his disciples," Oscar Wilde famously said, "and it is always Judas who writes the biography."(16)

What is biography? The word biography literally means life-writing. The simplest definition is a story about a person written by someone else. Hermione Lee defines biography using two metaphors. Biography is the autopsy, "the forensic examination of the dead body which takes place when the cause of death is unusual, suspicious, or ambiguous."(17) Imagine how an examiner in his quest to find the cause of death opens the subject's body and takes out each organ to look for anomalies, takes samples of tissue and fluids, and then forms an opinion of the cause of death. Biographers metaphorically do the same thing. They look over the life of the subject, open and inspect parts of his or her life, take samples of writing and work, and put it all together to write a story - a story that cannot but help show the biographer's point of view.

The other metaphor Lee uses is the portrait. The portrait is different from the autopsy in that it brings the subject to life. The highest praise one can give a portrait is that "the very life seems warm upon her lip' that it might be warm to the touch, 'looking as if she were alive.'"(18) The portrait is empathetic compared to the autopsy, which is cold and systematic. Lee warns us that the portrait has its limitations as metaphor. Staying objective, as the examiner in the autopsy has to is a lot easier than for the artist who wishes to flatter,

idealize, and distort the subject so that the portrait is appealing to the audience (and subject!).

Autobiography, memoir, and confessions are closely related. Autobiography is a story of a person written by that person. It is usually chronological from birth to the present point in the author's life. A memoir is a story about specific parts of a person's life written by that person. These two forms of biography are meant for the public's eyes. Confessions, another form of biography, are stories, warts and all, about a person written by that person, but usually not for publication. A confession is normally a private exchange between two people written to express sorrow and ask forgiveness. St. Augustine's *Confessions* are an exception: a confession to God meant to show others how Augustine had evolved from a non-believer to a believer in the Christian religion. Slave narratives have been compared to the *Confessions* because the narrators presented themselves publicly as spiritual beings shifting back and forth between their experiences and expositions of Christian doctrine. Perhaps too, they were trying to ask the reader to understand how their actions reflected the beliefs they came to understand as a Christian living in an enslaved world.

How do you write biography? Hermione Lee, in writing her rules for biography, leaves us with a tenth one, which is – there are no rules. I think we can agree that biographies should be objective and truthful, should have nothing omitted or concealed, should have identified sources, should be an investigation of identity, and they should have some value to the reader. So how do you begin to write biography?

When we write biography we could look at the concepts of time, space and scale as a way to organize our writing. Looking at time, we can use this concept to collapse and expand a period in one's life and we can move from the past to present and back again to gain a perspective of one's actions. We can, for instance, take an event and slow down the action by writing in increments of one minute or one hour. A wonderful example was "24" the TV series which ran from 2001 to 2010. Each year had 24 episodes representing 24 hours of one day in the life of Jack Bauer, a Counter Terrorist Unit (CTU) agent. Each episode included the hours and minutes of the day and was filled with suspense and intrigue.

Biographers can use space to their advantage because they can be in several places at one time. For instance, while a subject is making a speech at a convention, the biographer can also write about the advisors in the next room commenting on and reacting to the speech. The ability to put the subject in one place and at the same time tell what is going on at other places allows the reader to imagine the event with greater understanding.

Scale — the ability to zoom in and out of a scene —puts the story in historical context. Life does not happen in a vacuum; we are guided by events even as we shape them. Shifting the scale allows a biographer to portray these aspects of a life, as well.

Finally, I think it is important to remember that a biographer needs to be selective in deciding what to include, needs to have a purpose in writing about the subject, and needs to portray the subject as a character with many facets, which come to light sometimes in the small exchanges or quiet moments when no one seems to be looking.

Life does happen to each of us singly. The biographer is looking at just such a singular individual. Not all of our stories are this tragic, but, whether as writers or readers, we seek in them some way of seeing ourselves in better relation to a troubling world. That is why biography.(19)

Objectives

The overall objective for this unit is to present opportunities for students to write autobiography, memoir, narrative, and biography. Students will be able to write an autobiographical story of a memorable experience in their lives using pictures and prose. Students will be able to identify narrative and biographical writing by listening to two or three versions of Frederick Douglass's life. Students will be able to compare these stories to understand the author's theme or focus of Douglass's life story in each version.

Students will explore narrative as a form of writing about one's experiences. I will introduce narrative by modeling examples focusing on people from the past and the present. We will discuss the elements of narrative and discern what is included and not included in this genre. We will also look at biography as a form of writing about a subject's life, usually from birth to death, using the same format of model and discussion and then compare and contrast these two forms of writing. Students will then listen to escaped slave narratives and share reactions to these stories. Using a storyboard, students will imagine and draw scenes of what a day in the life of an escaped slave may have looked like. Once completed, the storyboard will be used to write a narrative.

Finally, in small groups, students will use their listening and speaking skills to interview each other and through flexible grouping, students will write short biographies using information from class created questions. Students will listen to the biographies and discuss similarities and differences. As an assessment piece, students will interview a family member and create a short graphic biography.

Strategies

Using images, I would like to start out the school year by using portraits and self-portraits from the on-line application Art Authority each morning as a writing warm-up. Students working in pairs will be asked to look at the pictures they see and write about them. They are to look at color, clothes, hair, eyes, expression, and background to create a story about the subject. We will continue this activity when students are introduced to each fugitive slave narrative. Each narrator will have photographs or illustrations on websites that are listed under the appendix. Students will follow the same elements for writing about each narrator before they read about who they are. Finally, they will be drawing images from these slave narratives in the form of a storyboard by imagining what a day in the narrators life would look like and from these images, write a short narrative.

Using text, I will introduce autobiography and memoir using mentor texts to read aloud to the class. We will pull out parts of the story and list the elements of each on chart paper. I will use read alouds to compare two biographies of Frederick Douglass and create a Venn diagram to record the differences and similarities in each story. We will discuss the elements of each biography to decipher what biography is and is not. Students will work together with other biographies to compare and contrast differences between texts. We will read together fugitive slave narratives and discuss the elements of narrative, including whether a narrative is a form of biography.

Using speaking and listening skills, I will model interviewing another person using questions created by the

class to show selection. Students will practice interviewing another student in small groups. I will assign four students to a group, two of whom will write a short biography about an identified "subject" in the group. While they are writing, a third student will interview the subject, or fourth student, and write a short biography. The fourth student will write a short autobiography while the group is writing. The three will then share out their biographies to the class, showing how different each one can be and the subject will share his autobiography for comparison. Finally, students will interview a family member after understanding the elements of biography.

Using writing skills, students will write a descriptive story about a memorable experience in their life. This memoir should include an incident that they want to share in class and include the elements we have identified. Using the fugitive slave narratives and their imagination, students will write what a day in the narrator's life might have been like when they were escaping to freedom. Finally, students will practice writing short biographies of classmates using the above strategies to complete their final writing piece, which will be a short graphic biography of a family member.

Activities/Lesson Plans

This unit was created for fourth graders, but can be easily modified for fifth and sixth graders. Indeed, just choosing higher-level biographies, will increase the reading and writing levels for these lessons. Each of the ten lessons will take about 45 minutes. Flexibility is built in so that lessons that are not completed can be continued in the next lesson.

Lesson One

Once you have decided to complete the unit or at the beginning of the school year, begin using Art Authority in your classroom. This website provides over 15,000 pieces of art, including portraits and is perfect for iPads and Smart boards. In Philadelphia, teachers also have access to ARTstor, which is available to teachers by creating an account at ARTstor.org. Students should be introduced to the site and have an opportunity to look around. Model looking at a portrait and asking students to discuss what they see. Focus on clothes, hair, eyes, expression, colors, mood, background objects or scenes, and shapes. Discuss the term "an arm and a leg", an idiom used to describe the high cost of goods or services. One possible source of the phrase came from 18th century artists who were paid for portraits by how much of the subject was included in the painting. To add the arms of a subject cost extra and to paint the entire body cost even more. Another source says the phrase came from veterans after World War II, when the term was used for how much was sacrificed (losing an arm or a leg) during the war. Finish the lesson by choosing another portrait and have students work in pairs to write about the subject. Ask them to look at the portrait using the criteria you have established. Once completed, pairs can share out in the class followed by reading the background information of the portrait given on the website.

Lesson Two

This lesson looks at the elements of autobiography. Begin by choosing two short stories that fit this genre. Examples would be: *Drawing from the City*, based on the oral stories of Tejubehan from India, *Warriors*, *Warthogs*, and *Wisdom: Growing Up in Africa* by Lyall Watson, and *Knucklehead* by Jon Scieszka an author of

children's books. For the longer books, I would choose parts of the story. *Drawing from the City* is short enough with incredible drawings to read in one lesson. After reading, discuss with students what elements make the story an autobiography. Chart responses and create a finalized list of elements. Post the list in the classroom. Have students create a timeline of their life from birth to the present. Introduce the concept of selection-by asking what events they would choose to add to their timeline and why they were chosen. Ask students to keep these for future writing.

Lesson Three

This lesson looks at the elements of memoir. Define memoir as a part of an autobiography that usually focuses on a specific event or events. Model memoir with one that you have written on your life for the class. Discuss what elements of the story make it a memoir and chart responses. Post a list of elements in the classroom along side autobiography and have students discuss in pairs the difference between the two. Share out students' thinking in class. Ask students to think about an experience or event that stands out in their lives. A prompt can be used such as, "One thing I will never forget is the time..." First have students draw their story on a six-block storyboard. Once completed, have students write their memoir using the storyboard illustrations. Allow time for students to share throughout the day.

Lesson Four and Five

These two lessons will look at the fugitive slave narratives. A background of slavery in America would be beneficial to students before this lesson. You may choose one to four narratives from this unit depending on your time constraints. Begin by showing a photograph or illustration of the author. (See websites below.) Ask students to write about the subject using the same techniques for portraits. Tell the narrators story in your own words either orally and/or typed for the Smart board or overhead projector. Discuss the story and answer questions (there will be many!). Ask students to describe what the narrator did while hiding or escaping. Ask what they would see, how they would feel, what they might hear, smell, taste, and touch? Have student imagine what a day would look like. Ask students to use a 6-block storyboard to draw a day during the slave's escape, and then write a story either in paragraph form or as captions for each illustration. Repeat this lesson for each fugitive slave narrative.

Lesson Six

This lesson looks at biographies and how different they can be depending upon the focus, theme, and author. Ask students what they think the difference is between autobiography and biography to create a definition of biography. Read two versions of Frederick Douglass, for example, *Words Set Me Free: The Story of Young Frederick Douglass* by Lesa Cline-Ransome and a *Picture Book of Frederick Douglass* by David A. Adler. Chart with the class differences and similarities of the two stories. Focus on what the author included and excluded in each story. Discuss how biographers select what to put in a biography and what to leave out. Point out how each biographer has a purpose for writing the biography and discuss what these authors may have intended. In groups, have a set of biographies for students to read and discuss together. Ask them to chart similarities and differences for each set. Suggestions are biographies on Harriet Tubman, Rosa Parks, Jackie Robinson, President Lincoln, Martin Luther King, Jr., Benjamin Franklin, and Langston Hughes. Post students responses and allow time for sharing.

Lesson Seven

This lesson continues the biography process by focusing on time, space, scale and sources. Begin by

reviewing elements of biography, and then introduce the concepts of time, space, and scale found in the background information above. Use examples of each and ask students for examples from stories the class has read during the year. Next, ask student how biographers get their information and discuss different types of research, including primary documents, articles, books, and interviews. Ask students if they were writing a biography of a classmate, what questions would they want to ask. Brainstorm a list of questions to ask the subject keeping in mind questions that are revealing, tell about character, tell what is going on in the area during this time, and what is the intention of the biography. Chart together an agreed upon list of questions for the interview. Model interviewing a subject and assign students into pairs to practice the interview process.

Lesson Eight

This lesson will continue Lesson Seven and may need more time than 45 minutes. Model how you would like students to write their biographies. Keep it simple, for instance, your direction could be write three paragraphs (beginning, middle and end) about the subject using the interview questions and any additional information they uncover. To further explore the concept of selection and intention, assign students into groups of four. Explain that two students will write independent biographies using the questions as prompts-without interviewing the subject assigned in the group. A third student will interview the fourth student (subject) in the group using the same questions. The fourth student will write an autobiography using the same questions while the other three are writing. Once a draft is completed, have groups read their pieces to the class. Discuss the differences and similarities of the three biographies. Finally, have the subject in each group read their autobiography, confirming or denying information found in the group's biographies.

Lesson Nine

This lesson will look at different types of biography and sources. Introduce graphic biography by reading *Satchel Paige Striking Out Jim Crow* by James Sturm and Rich Tommaso. Discuss elements of a graphic biography, including what they noticed about the scenes and dialogue. Introduce the importance of sources by asking where the author may have found information on Satchel Paige. Create a list of possible sources and where they can be found including the Internet, books, articles, letters, photographs, and diaries. Introduce students to the biography assignment, which will be to write a biography of a family member. Have students create a set of interview questions and possible sources for information to write a short biography. Give students time to complete their research, as some family members may not be easily accessible.

Lesson Ten

This lesson will look at creating a graphic biography and may take longer than 45 minutes to complete. Students will use the information and documents from their biography assignment. Begin by reviewing elements of a graphic biography. Review the principle of selection by modeling a graphic biography you have completed of a family member and discussing how you decided what information to include and exclude. Ask students to create a graphic biography, with dialogue written at the top of each scene and information at the bottom. Distribute large paper for students to use with the blocks preprinted to save time. A rubric for grading the biography can be created together with the class, which will guide their creation of the graphic biography.

Annotated Bibliography

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Rhiel, Mary. *The Seductions of Biography*. New York: Routledge, 1996. This volume contains essays by authors on the topic of biography including Jean Fagan Yellin who wrote a biography of Harriet Jacobs.

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This biography of Harriet Jacobs uses Harriet's narrative to create a full picture of her life as a runaway slave.

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Appendix/Standards

Websites

The following websites have images of the fugitive slaves found in the background section.

1) For Harriet Jacobs - www.harrietjacobs.org/index.html

2) For Henry "Box" Brown - www.pbs.org/wned/underground-railroad/stories-of-freedom/henry-box-brown/

3) For Francis Fedric - www.aaregistry.org/historic_events/view/francis-frederic-wrote-about-slavery.

4) For Ellen and William Craft - www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/nge/Article.jsp?id=h-622&hl=y

Art Authority is an app that is perfect for iPads. Go to www.artauthority.net. For Art Authority for Macs, go to: <http://www.opendoor.com/envimac/artauthority/AAMacDownload.html>. This site will allow a 10-day trial period. The cost of using the site is \$10.00.

Implementing District Standards

E04. B-K.1.1.1

Demonstrate understanding of key ideas and details in informational texts.

Students will explain events, procedures, ideas, steps, or concepts in a historical text including what happened and why, based on specific information in the text.

E04. B-C.3.1

Demonstrate understanding of connections within, between, and/or among informational texts. Students will explain how an author uses reasons and evidence to support particular points in a text.

E04.C.1.3

Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective techniques, descriptive details, and clear event sequences. Students will use narrative techniques such as dialogue and description to develop experiences and events or to show the responses of characters to situations.

CC.1.5.4.A

Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions on grade level topics and texts, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly. Students will engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions on grade level topics and texts, using informational texts.

Notes

1. Draanen, Wendelin. *Shredderman*, 118.
2. Gabriel, Barbara, editor. *Tainting History*, 93.
3. Penningroth, Dylan. Writing Slavery's History, *OAH Magazine of History*, 13.
4. Foner, Eric & McGirr, Lisa, eds. *American History Now*, 75.
5. Jacobs, Harriet. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, ix.
6. Ibid, 15.
7. Ibid, 278.
8. Ibid, 301.
9. Fedric, Francis. *Slave Life in Virginia and Kentucky*, 103.
10. Ibid, 103.
11. Ibid, 110.
12. Carbado, Devon W. and Weise, Donald, editors. *The Long Walk to Freedom*", 194.

13. Ibid, 196.
14. Ibid, 200.
15. Ibid, 215.
16. Holroyd, Michael. *Works on Paper-The Craft of Biography and Autobiography*, 4.
17. Lee, Hermione. *Biography, A Very Short Introduction*, 1.
18. Ibid, 3.
19. Rhiel, Mary and Suchoff, David, eds. *The Seduction of Biography*, xiii.

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