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## **A picture is worth a thousand words: Rediscovering biography**

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"All the adversity I've had in my life, all my troubles and obstacles, have strengthened me... You may not realize it when it happens, but a kick in the teeth may be the best thing in the world for you." ~Walt Disney

### **Context**

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This will be my fourteenth year teaching at Thoreau Demonstration Academy in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Thoreau is a middle school servicing 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> grades. I teach remedial reading to all three grades. For a student to be placed in my class they had to have not passed the state assessment and have a lexile score significantly below grade level. I am not their regular language arts teacher, but I work in conjunction with the core language arts teachers. There are some general defining characteristics that are true for the majority of my students. Homework is inconsistent and often incomplete or superficial; supplies are rarely brought to class; and emotional outbursts are frequent. Sometimes to calm my students, I will read aloud to them. In my experience with children who normally have a difficult time sitting still, they will sit quietly and listen to me read to them for upwards of an hour. They love a good story. For their own work, however, they find it difficult to get past the superficial to present the deeper, fuller story that would be much more interesting. They gravitate to books with lots of pictures so the pictures can tell them parts of the story and they do not have to read as much.

### **Rationale**

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Every January and February, through their core Language Arts class, the students at Thoreau choose an influential person, research that person, present their person in the form of a living history museum (referred to as Brotherhood), and write a biographical essay. During this year's research and production phase of the project, I paid attention to how my students went about gathering and processing the biographical information

necessary for the project. It was not any surprise to me that of the students who had seemingly unsuccessful portrayals, the majority were my students. Once I processed the performance of my students (both in the living museum and on their biographical essay), I realized that they did not really know how to go beyond the superficial information to make their biographical project any richer. The core language arts teacher is not as able to spend one-on-one time with students as I am (they have between 40-50 students per class).

## Guiding Question

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How can I get my students to read long enough, research more thoroughly to extend past the superficial and uncover a richer biographical story?

## My Biography Assumptions

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For the nine years that I actually facilitated students' efforts during the Brotherhood project, I operated under two overarching assumptions. I taught my seventh grade students how to find biographical research, take notes, organize their notes, transfer those notes into a five paragraph essay, and then properly cite their sources using the MLA format. I am embarrassed to say that not once in those nine years did I ever think to teach the children about how a biography (and thus their essay and oral presentation), while technically non-fiction, is really a story complete with all of the elements of fiction, those juicy details, that make a story worth reading. In hindsight, through the years, some students inherently understood this distinction but a large majority did not.

The second assumption I made was that the students could and would automatically make the text-to-self connection. As Nigel Hamilton explained in *How To Do Biography: A Primer*, "...the intrinsic aim of biography...[is] to penetrate the moral core of a life, to interpret it - and thereby not only learn facts and information but acquire insight and lessons that could be serviceable in one's own life, either as warnings or inspiration." <sup>1</sup> I believed the very structure of the Brotherhood project <sup>2</sup> facilitated this connection. It was not until reading Hamilton's book I discovered what had been missing in the performance of my students, which harkened back to the Jack Webb "Just the Facts" days. <sup>3</sup> My students did not tell anecdotal stories either in their written or oral presentations that highlighted their character's trials in such a way as to be personally instructive.

## Objective

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The objective is to help my students analyze a piece of non-print text as a precursor to reading a piece of biographical print text. I want them to unearth anecdotal information that will go beyond the simple recitation of facts to achieve a more full-bodied understanding of a character as ultimately displayed during the

Brotherhood presentations and essays.

## Curricular Plan

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For this unit, I will prepare them for the Brotherhood project by teaching them to use pictures to help tell the biographical story. We will begin our pictorial analysis with a young girl's kindergarten picture to establish the analytical process. <sup>4</sup> I will ask leading questions in an attempt to ferret out more information than hair and eye color and stimulate discussion about what is seen and not seen in the picture.

We will then progress to looking at the iconic pictures of Walt Disney and compare them to the picture on the cover of Neal Gabler's *Walt Disney: The Triumph of the American Imagination*. In our examination of the pictures of Disney we will continue with the analytical process but also add a research component to address our analytical questions in reference to the pictures. We will utilize the on-line data bases compiled by the district, reference books already present in our school library, and the books listed in the bibliography as our reference sources. We will employ the resources in the order of length and complexity beginning with the simplest most rudimentary text first and then scaffolding through the remaining text in order of complexity.

Next, we will analyze iconic pictures representing historic events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. We will apply the same analytic process but then scaffold in research on the backstory behind the iconic picture. In particular we will focus upon the picture of President Johnson found in Robert Caro's *The Years of Lyndon Johnson: Means of Ascent*, on Dorothea Lange's *Migrant Mother* and on Will Counts' picture of Elizabeth Eckford attempting to enter Little Rock High School on September 4, 1957. Lastly, each student will research iconic pictures of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, choose one picture on which to focus, research the backstory of the picture and present their picture and story to the class. The unit will take place in November and December so that it proceeds and lays the foundation for the actual Brotherhood project in their language arts class during January and February.

I did not include the pictures in this unit due to copyright concerns; however, each of the pictures is easily accessible on the internet.

## My biography reeducation

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### What is a biography?

For this seminar I looked at seven different sources related to what a biography actually is, of what it should consist, and how it should be written. All of the sources agree that a biography is much more than a sterile, clinical autopsy of someone's life; <sup>5</sup> it is a narrative composed of all the juicy bits that make the character worth studying. <sup>6</sup> Hamilton contends, "A biography is also expected to portray, by implication, how that individual's life connects with more universal aspects of the human condition: the common themes and preoccupations that fascinate us about life..." <sup>7</sup> It is not enough to say that Sally got up every morning and changed her sheets unless there was a reason behind doing so each morning such as that during her childhood she would wet the bed each night because her father was abusing her. Sally would get up and wash

and change the sheets so her mother would never find out about the abuse. Then we will want to know about changing the sheets.

A biography at its core consists of a what and a how <sup>8</sup> that is based upon primary and secondary evidence; <sup>9</sup> it is a record and interpretation of real lives <sup>10</sup> and the conflicts and journeys those lives take. <sup>11</sup> What sets biography apart from other non-fiction is the why and what implication the why may have for my life.

Biography, while technically housed in the non-fiction genre, is written like fiction. I can hear myself saying, "Biography is the true story of someone's life; the key word being 'story'. Through this seminar I consciously realized that a biography has all of the elements of fiction: characters (primary and secondary), a setting, a central problem, a plot structure complete with rising action, a climax, and falling action, a resolution, and a central theme. All of these elements make up the story. The key difference is that, as the biographer, I am doing research to find the elements rather than making them up as a novelist would. According to Ira Bruce Nadel in *Biography: Fiction, Fact & Form* "...biography is a complex narrative as well as a record of an individual's life, a literary process as well as a[n] historical product." <sup>12</sup> Milton Lomask explains in *The Biographer's Craft*, "Gathering his material, he [the biographer] uses the quasi-scientific methods of the historical researcher; writing his book, he uses the techniques of the fiction writer." <sup>13</sup> In other words, the research forms the skeleton of the story, but you, the biographer, get to decide how much meat gets put where on the body and in what proportion.

## Research decisions

As the biographer I have to make certain choices. There is not any way to include every single element about a person's life and still have the story be interesting and readable. Selectivity is the key in researching. Biography appears objective in nature when the opposite is actually true. <sup>14</sup> The selection process of sorting relevant versus irrelevant material is natural to us, a core function of our brain. We perform the selection process millions of times each day without conscious thought. It is our individual experiences, however, that make the selection process so unique. What I select as important will be completely different from all others experiencing the same situation simply by the nature of what I consciously or subconsciously deem relevant to me.

In terms of biographical research, at first I need to cast a wide net for the types of information I think I will need; I do not yet know what thematic threads I am going to find. As I continue in the research process, the threads will begin to emerge and then I can begin to narrow down the scope of my research, always keeping an open mind to the results of the research. <sup>15</sup> I am the author; I decide what facts are the most significant. As a litmus test for relevant information, always ask yourself, "Does this information leave a residue? Does it leave something behind with the reader?" <sup>16</sup> If it does, keep it; if not, toss it out.

I, then, have to decide the organization of those facts unearthed during the research phase. I can choose to organize the research in chronological order, <sup>17</sup> thematically, <sup>18</sup> or select a combination of chronological and thematic. <sup>19</sup> As you research keep in the back of your mind that it is not the facts themselves that determine the value of the biography but the presentation of those facts (how you choose to organize) that establishes real value. <sup>20</sup>

Perhaps the most revelatory piece of information is that there are no rules for writing a biography. Hermoine Lee in *Biography: A Very Short Introduction* lays out 10 rules for writing a biography only to have the 10<sup>th</sup> be

that there are no rules, thereby disregarding the previous nine. <sup>21</sup> It is immaterial if you are referring to the myriad of biographical forms: biographical essay, monograph, psychoanalytic study profile, critical biography, full-length portrait, or composite portrait; <sup>22</sup> in its basic form, a biography is telling the story of someone's life <sup>23</sup> with you as the storyteller making all the decisions about what to say and how to say it.

## Using pictures to tell the story

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It is said a picture is worth a thousand words. The picture could be paint on canvas or other mediums or light trapped on film. Whatever the method of creating the picture, the result is the same, the picture tells a story – a story crafted by the artist. In the process of creating the picture, the artist engages in a process of crafting the story through selection – what elements of the story are important enough to be included in the picture and what are not?

### **LBJ Hollywood picture**

Eventually a picture can take on a life of its own. It represents one brief moment in time yet as time moves on the moment in the picture takes on greater significance for what it shows and does not show. Look for example at the WWII pictures of President Lyndon Baines Johnson in Robert Caro's *The Years of Lyndon Johnson: Means of Ascent*. <sup>24</sup> Look in particular at the first picture in the picture inserts. On the surface this is a staged picture of a future President of the United States. He looks handsome. He is smoking a cigarette (this alone will stimulate discussion). But the picture looks too staged. He has a bit of a smirk as if he has a secret. What is the picture trying to hide? Upon investigation I learned that during World War II, while LBJ was touring shipyards up and down the West Coast of the United States, he engaged the services of a Hollywood photographer. With the photographs, LBJ wanted to ascertain which poses showcased him as someone to be trusted, revered, and lauded. <sup>25</sup>

At first glance at the initial photo, I see a handsome and confident man. However, as I continue to look at the first picture, knowing what I now know, this picture takes on a greater significance than LBJ had intended. To me, this picture highlights LBJ's facade -the slight smirk provides the clue to the man who would shake your hand and slap you on the back all while picking your pocket. At the time this picture was taken, the people of Texas were being told LBJ was off fighting for their country. In fact he was attending Hollywood movie screenings and movie star parties, as well as 'entertaining' Alice Glass, the mistress of one of his biggest patrons, Charles E. Marsh while his wife, Lady Bird, stayed at a hotel in Los Angeles and ran his congressional office. <sup>26</sup> The picture takes on a whole new meaning once I know the backstory, the part I can not see but can intuit. With this picture, we can discuss our multiple faces – the one we wear for public and the private face. Using the picture allows us to have a much more interesting and influential discussion rather than just a superficial survey of the facts.

### *Migrant Mother*

Next, look at Dorothea Lange's *Migrant Mother*. This picture is also a staged portrait. At first glance this is a picture of an old, sad, poor woman. However, upon investigation, it is so much more. Dorothea Lange had been commissioned by the Resettlement Administration to document migratory farm labor. She was in Nipomo, CA in Feb/March of 1936 at the end of a month long trip. Lange saw a woman, Florence Owens

Thompson, and knew she had to photograph her. Lange took six photos <sup>27</sup> of Thompson and her children. These photos were submitted to the Resettlement Administration along with hundreds of others, but this one photo seemed to tell the whole story of what was happening in the nation. The struggle seen in the picture exemplified the struggle of all those who suffered during the Great Depression. We identify with the woman; her struggle is our struggle without ever knowing what the literal story is behind the photo, we 'know'. <sup>28</sup> With this photo we can discuss the struggle and how we all have had to struggle in our own ways.

### **Elizabeth Eckford - Little Rock Nine**

Will Counts' picture of Elizabeth Eckford, one of the Little Rock Nine, attempting to enter Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas while being verbally taunted by a mob of whites — most notably Hazel Bryan — instantly tells the story of segregation. <sup>29</sup> This picture was absolutely not staged. Will Counts was a native of Little Rock at the time of desegregation. His pictures were his attempt to tell the real story of what he was witnessing. In this one picture we see the depth of the racial hatred yet the resoluteness of the African-Americans in seeking to exercise their basic constitutional rights. This picture is so provocative that it will evoke a reaction and stimulate discussion. I want my students to want to look deeper. <sup>30</sup>

The pictures and the discussions will lay the foundation and serve to stimulate their reading and writing about the subject in a picture.

## **Walt Disney**

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Converting research into a written product is a key part of the Brotherhood project (and a Common Core key focus). The essay (like the presentation) should reflect the depth of the research. I have included here an example of a lengthy essay that I will use with the students as an example of structure and information selectivity. At the end of our research phase, I will ask the students to compare their notes with what I included in my essay.

For this unit, I was drawn to Disney as a research subject due to the students' familiarity with Walt Disney, the plethora of information available, and Disney's happy, pure Americana persona.

Using the resources available to the students and a few others, my biography of Disney helps me explain the man in the photograph on the front cover of Gabler's book. This picture stands in contrast to the hundreds of others that show Disney as a jubilant, happy-go-lucky kind of guy. Why did Gabler choose this photo? Is it that there is more to the story than the smiling man and his mouse? I tried to use all that I had learned about a biography. I have included pieces of information I found to be particularly relevant and yet omitted other pieces of information because they were not germane to my understanding of the man in the picture. <sup>31</sup> As I was researching I consistently asked myself if this information helps me tell the warts and all story of the man in the picture; is there residue?

### **Example of a Biography of Walt Disney**

Walt Disney provided the soundtrack of my life. The first two albums I bought (at the ripe old age of eight) were Brer Rabbit and a collection of popular Disney songs. For Christmas that year, Santa brought me the

Disney songbook so I could learn to accompany myself as I sang and lived "*It's a Small World*". Every afternoon I would rush home from school so I could tune in to sing along with Annette, Darlene, Karen and Cubby and I could learn whatever life lesson they were teaching that episode. Tuesdays were always my favorite day because there was a special guest (At 44 I can still sing the song that introduced the special guest.) My first actual theater movie was Disney's *The Rescuers Down Under*. At dinner each night, I ate off of the Donald Duck plate and drank out of the Donald Duck glass.<sup>32</sup> During second grade my mother made my sister and me ponchos out of an old blanket and put Donald Duck on mine and Mickey on my sister's. The works and images created by Disney permeated my life; in a strange way, they still do.

In the Disney world the good guys always won, people were happy, and life was as it should be. A far cry from my reality. Whether it be the music, the tv show or the movies, Disney provided my escape. Through his short cartoons, feature-length animations, live-action films, comic books, records, television shows and theme parks, Disney spent a lifetime working to refashion the world in the image of his own imagination and prevent reality from eradicating the genuine innocence and purity of childhood, a feeling Walt experienced for only a brief time in his own childhood but would spend the rest of his life trying to recapture.

Disney and Mickey Mouse were definitely not an overnight success story. Walt did not just wake up one day, draw Mickey and the rest is history. Walt's success from the cartoons up to the theme parks are all a direct result of the lessons he learned from his ancestors and from his childhood.

### **Disneys come to America**

Walter Elias Disney was born December 5, 1901 in Chicago, Illinois on the second floor of a house that his father Elias built. Walt was the fourth of five children born to Elias and Flora. It was a family story that Walt got his name from a "pastoral bargain".<sup>33</sup> Walt's mother Flora and the wife of the minister were pregnant at the same time. Supposedly, Elias and the minister struck a deal that if their wives both gave birth to sons that each son would be given the first name of the other man. The minister's name was Walter Parr.<sup>34</sup> For most of his life Walt felt as if he were a square peg in the Disney family, however Walt would prove through his inexhaustible ambition that he was a Disney through and through.

The Disney family originally hailed from England. Arundel Elias Disney (Walt's great grandpa) was opportunistic and ambitious. He consistently sought a better life for him and his family so in July of 1834, he sold his holdings and along with his brother Robert and Robert's family set sail for America. The family actually ended up settling on 149 acres in Ontario, Canada. A few years later Arundel's oldest son Kepple and his wife Mary purchased 100 acres in the Ontario area with the intent to farm, but Kepple had the Disney wanderlust. When he first heard of the oil strikes, he left Mary to live with her sister for two years while he joined a drilling crew only to never find oil. Kepple returned home only to leave again for a year to drill for salt wells. No salt was ever found. In 1877 he left again along with his two oldest sons, Ellis and Robert, to search for his fortune in California gold; he only got as far as Kansas where he was enticed to purchase 300 acres of farmland in Ellis County.<sup>35</sup>

Life in Kansas was extremely difficult. The climate was dry and cold – seemingly inconducive to farming. Snow drifts could be as high as a man's chest. In addition, the Disneys were under constant threat of Indian massacres, so Kepple and Elias left for Florida in search of a more hospitable living environment for the family. While in Florida, Elias met Flora Call. Their marriage in 1888 merged the fearless determination of the Disney family with the soft intellectual temperament of the Call family,<sup>36</sup> a merging that will truly manifest itself in their youngest son, Walt.



Elias inherited the Disney wanderlust and economic adversity of his father and grandfather. While in Florida, Ellis bought an orange grove but a freeze killed all of his crop, forcing him to take a job delivering the mail. A death in the Call family encouraged Elias to move himself and Flora to Chicago where his younger brother Robert had found some success. Elias supported his growing family by being a carpenter.

### **The Influence of Marceline**

When Walt was three, Elias became disillusioned with life in the big city so he moved the family to somewhere more idyllic, Marceline, Missouri. Marceline was incorporated as a terminal point along the Santa Fe Railroad route between Chicago and Kansas City. In its early days, the town boasted several saloons, a post office, two banks, a theater, a newspaper, a few retail shops, and seven various religious institutions. Marceline was the exact opposite of Chicago; it was a small, simple, stable community. Walt would later reminisce that Marceline appeared and behaved exactly the way a small town should and that the citizens of Marceline were kind, tolerant, and caring people who helped citizens in need. While the Disneys only lived in Marceline for three and a half years, the time Walt spent on the farm in the cramped and crudely constructed home with the white-washed siding and the green trim was to be the most vivid memories of his life and the model for how he came to believe life should be lived. <sup>37</sup>

### **Interest in drawing**

Walt became interested in drawing at a very early age. Every time his Aunt Maggie would come to visit she would bring him a Big Chief drawing tablet and pencils. To Walt, every gift of tablet and pencils equated to an affirmation of his talent and encouragement to continue. In addition to Aunt Maggie, Walt received encouragement from Doc Sherwood. Doc Sherwood asked Walt to sketch his horse, Rupert. In one story Walt was paid five cents for the drawing. In another Doc put the drawing up on his office wall for all to see. The barber, Bert Hudson, would offer Walt free haircuts in exchange for Walt's drawings. <sup>38</sup>

Walt would draw on anything he could find. His first cartoons occurred on the corners of the pages in his textbooks. He would draw an animal in the corners and then quickly flip the pages so it looked as if the animal was moving. One time outside their barn, he and his sister Ruth found a bucket of some black liquid that Walt thought was paint. He reassured Ruth that it was ok to use and then painted a picture on the side of the barn. Much to his dismay, the black liquid was tar. Needless to say, Elias was less than thrilled.

### **Lessons from Elias and the Paper Route**

Living in Marceline was a picturesque time that came to an end way too soon. Just as what had happened with the orange groves, the farm defeated Elias so he moved his family to Kansas City. Elias purchased a paper route and enlisted his children to help sell and distribute the papers. For the Disneys, the route was more than a way to make a living, it became a way of life. Every decision and activity centered around the completion of the route each day. <sup>39</sup>

Walt was nine years old when he began the paper route. According to Walt, the carefree days of his childhood had vanished. For the first year after the move, Walt delivered the newspapers by foot and after that by bicycle. Every morning Walt would get up at 3:30am. He would go get his assigned 50 newspapers and deliver them to his customers. He would return home by 5:30 or 6:00, take a short nap and then eat breakfast before heading off to school. Every day he would leave school a half hour early so that he could make the afternoon run. On Sunday he had double the amount of papers to deliver.



In the beginning, Walt was excited about the paper route, but the excitement was short-lived. In the winter Walt would have to deliver the papers in the cold and snow, often slipping on the icy steps. Sometimes he would be so cold and so tired that he would inadvertently fall asleep on the route. He would awake with a start and have to hurry to get the route completed. Nothing got in the way of completing the route. Things got worse when his brother Roy got another job and Walt had to do both his and Roy's routes <sup>40</sup>. For the remainder of his life the route would serve as a touchstone in Walt's life. He knew what hard work really was.

Due to his time on the route and his father's frugal ways, Walt experienced the tenuous connection between work and compensation and he learned how to work for what he wanted. Elias was not willing to pay Walt for his efforts on the route arguing that the route was the family business and since Walt was a member of the family, it was incumbent upon him to work without monetary compensation. Walt would often take an extra stack of newspapers to sell, deliver medicine for a pharmacy while also delivering the newspapers, or work in a candy store during school recess so that he could have some spending money of his own. Later on, the desire to be properly compensated would ultimately lead Walt to create Mickey.

According to Walt, he and his father were opposites. Whereas Elias was grim, Walt was jocund, cheerful. Whereas Elias plodded along, Walt was enthusiastic. <sup>41</sup> Elias did not believe his children should be wasting time on frivolous endeavors such as drawing and performing which put he and Walt at odds more often than not. Due to their differences, Walt felt he often took the brunt of his father's temper, which flared often enough to make a long lasting impression. <sup>42</sup>

### **Beginning of a Career in Art**

Channeling the wanderlust of his ancestors, seven years after moving to Kansas City, Elias decided it was time for the family to move back to Chicago. It was there that Walt's drawing went from being a pastime to the gateway to a career. Walt dropped out of high school after a year. <sup>43</sup> In lieu of high school, Walt started some serious art classes at the Chicago Academy of Fine Arts. It was here that Walt realized that he would never be a fine artist, but that his talent lay in caricature. Walt would later refer to this time as the turning point in his career. <sup>44</sup>

After Walt returned from serving in France with the Ambulance Corps at the conclusion of WWI, Walt moved to Kansas City instead of back to Chicago. He was old enough to now be out on his own and yet again, his father had refused to give Walt the money Walt had rightly earned while in the Ambulance Corps believing that Walt would just be wasting his money. <sup>45</sup>

This second time in Kansas City, while seemingly riddled with failure, would lay the foundation for Walt's future success. He would land a series of art jobs. At each job, Walt would learn the trade and then strike out on his own to do it better. However, each time Walt would form his own business, it would fail not because of the product but because lack of a financial foundation. Walt knew how to work due to his years on the route; he did not know how to manage the financial aspects of a business. But Walt was not to be deterred. He studied every aspect of making cartoons. He was a student of the genre. He even set up a shed studio in his backyard where he experimented with, perfected, and created new animation techniques. It was the creation of the Laugh-O-Gram cartoons that set Walt on his path to Mickey. <sup>46</sup>

In his studio shed he made a series of short, silent, slap-stick comedies called Laugh-O-Grams that were moderately successful <sup>47</sup> as well as a short movie, *Alice's Wonderland*, in which he created the technique of using a human figure (six year old Virginia Davis) in a cartoon setting. <sup>48</sup> Unfortunately, the movie took three

years to make, resulting in Walt's bankruptcy. He needed to do something different if he was to have any success making animated cartoons and movies.

### **Hollywood, Alice, and Oswald the Rabbit**

Walt realized that Kansas City was not the center of movie making, so he picked up stakes in true Disney fashion and struck out to find someplace more suitable, Hollywood. When Walt moved out to Hollywood he could not get a job at a studio, so he went back to what he knew, making cartoons. He made a brazen ploy to Margaret Winkler, a distributor in New York. He informed her that he was no longer connected with Laugh-O-Gram Films Inc. of Kansas City, but that he was establishing a studio in Los Angeles with the express purpose of creating more *Alice* cartoons. He said that some of his staff had traveled with him and that he had access to production facilities and would soon be back on track making the *Alice* cartoons. All of which was a complete fabrication. Walt was not above manufacturing the truth if it suited his purposes. Winkler bought the ploy and ordered six new *Alice* films. Walt convinced his brother Roy to be his business partner and asked his uncle Robert to lend him \$500 to get the movies going. Disney Brothers Studio was born. <sup>49</sup>

Walt procured an office and a camera and persuaded Virginia Davis and her family to come to Hollywood. At first Walt did everything: thought up the story for the *Alice* movies, directed the movies, drew the cartoon characters, and put the live action and animation together. But it was too much for one person, so Walt and Roy hired three men to operate the camera and help with the animation. They hired three women to ink and paint the black and white cartoon drawings. Walt convinced Ub Iwerks <sup>50</sup> to move to Hollywood and join the studio. Ub was talented and fast, just what they needed. <sup>51</sup>

The *Alice* short movies proved to be very successful. With the increase in staff, Disney Brothers Studios were able to turn out twelve *Alice* shorts in 1924, 18 more in 1925 and 26 in 1926. By the end of 1926, however, in true Disney fashion, Walt was ready to move on to the next adventure. Walt negotiated with Alice Winkler's husband, Charles Mintz, for the studio to create another animated film series. What they created was a playful, funny, and energetic rabbit named Oswald. The film series soon became very popular and Walt believed that for the first time he had vocational and financial stability. <sup>52</sup>

However, Mintz grew tired of Walt's consistent bargaining for more money and greater control of the Oswald movies. <sup>53</sup> Mintz came to believe that he could make the Oswald cartoons cheaper if he just had the staff from the Disney Brothers Studio. After all, they were the ones who did all of the drawing anyway (Walt was the thinker of the operation. He did very little of the day-to-day drawing on the cartoons.) So, Mintz did not renegotiate the Oswald contract with the Disney Brothers Studio and he lured away a healthy percentage of the staff at the studio. <sup>54</sup> Walt was crushed! He felt betrayed. Most of all he felt like he was a chip off the old block, just like his father and grandfather, having to start over time-after-time.

Despite the apparent setbacks (losing the staff and the Oswald cartoons), this was also the time when Walt met Lillian Bounds, the future Mrs. Walt Disney. Lillian was one of the original women hired to ink the black and white drawings for the *Alice* movies. Except for when he was performing for others, Walt was very shy and had never had a serious relationship. He liked how Lillian's short bobbed hair would bounce when she laughed, so he took advantage of driving her home from work to get to know her better. Eventually he asked her out for a date. Walt and Lillian were married July 13, 1925. <sup>55</sup>

## Mickey is Born

On the train home from New York and Walt's final meeting with Mintz, Walt's wife Lillian<sup>56</sup> recalled that Walt kept repeating that he would never work for anyone else again as long as he lived; he would never again allow anyone to have control over his decisions. Many have criticized Walt for his almost obsessive need later to control everything about the business (the criticism probably justified) but Walt felt he could no longer allow his work to be subjected to another's volatility.<sup>57</sup> On this same train home to Los Angeles, Walt sketched out the plot for a cartoon called *Plane Crazy* that starred a mouse who builds himself a plane to impress a lady mouse.<sup>58</sup> Walt was going to name the mouse Mortimer but Lillian thought the name sounded too fancy, so she suggested Mickey.<sup>59</sup> The original Mickey had skinny stick legs, a long tail, and a sharp face. He was not as nice as Mickey of today. He played mean tricks on the other characters.

Mickey was not an immediate success. Initially, Walt had difficulty selling Mickey to any theaters. Ever the innovator, he realized he needed to do something different to set Mickey apart from Oswald. Walt decided to add sound to the third Mickey movie, *Steamboat Willie*. The manager of the Colony Theater in New York City agreed to show *Steamboat Willie*.<sup>60</sup> And the rest, they say, is history.

Mickey quickly became a huge hit. Mickey Mouse Clubs began forming all over the country, a Mickey cartoon strip began appearing in 40 newspapers throughout the country and Mickey merchandise like dolls, buttons, pencils, toothbrushes and books began flying off the shelves, metaphorically speaking.<sup>61</sup>

## Walt the Innovator

By the time Mickey came along, Disney Brothers Studios had changed their name to Walt Disney Studios. Walt was the idea man of the operation, the one who compelled the Studio to be innovative and push the technological envelope. With the creation of the *Three Little Pigs* cartoon, Walt added a more complex plot than previous Disney movies and he added a theme song, "Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf". Much to Walt's surprise and joy, people came out of the theater singing the song. Coincidentally, the rise of animated movies coincided with the advent of color film for movies produced by a company called Technicolor. Walt created *Flowers and Trees*, the first cartoon in full color, for which he won an Academy Award.<sup>62</sup>

When Walt first started making cartoons, they were short (no more than a few minutes) and were shown before the full-length feature. Walt had the idea to create a full-length animated movie. Walt knew he could not count on slapstick gags as he had previously; he needed a complete plot with drama and romance. So, Walt chose the story *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* to use as his first full-length animated feature. It took over 750,000 drawings and three years to make the 83 minute movie. Walt's goal was for each character to seem as real as a live actor. He wanted to make people laugh, cry, and hold their breath in fear and anticipation. He used a special multi-plane camera to make the background as three-dimensional as possible. The movie opened on December 21, 1937 in true Hollywood style complete with red carpet. Again, Walt won an Academy Award. This one had the golden Oscar statue surrounded by seven small Oscars<sup>63</sup>.

## Conclusion

Walt was at the top of his game. No longer would he have to justify to his father whether drawing could be a viable career. No longer would he have to move from place to place to find his success; he MADE his success frame-by-frame. Due to the success of *Snow White*, Walt and Roy bought 51 acres in Burbank and built a new studio that would eventually house hundreds of employees. Walt continued to be a technological innovator

and to push the imagination with the creation of Disneyland, fashioned much like his beloved Marceline. In order to pay for it, Walt came up with the idea of putting on a Disney television show. He could use the revenue generated by the television show to pay for the amusement park. His idea worked like a charm. ABC Studios decided to put on a show that would feature Walt Disney himself as the host, Disney cartoons and live-action skits. In 1955, Walt also created a 5 day per week Mickey Mouse Club Show which featured a group of young actors called mouseketeers. Initially, television was not looked upon favorably, as a threat to the movies, but Walt made television cool and profitable. <sup>64</sup>

Disneyland opened on July 17, 1955 in Anaheim, CA. Walt fashioned many of the sets to be reminiscent of his idea of the idyllic place, Marceline, Missouri. Walt even had his employees go to Disney University so that they could learn how to properly work at Disneyland and treat guests as the citizens of Marceline would. <sup>65</sup>

Walt Disney passed away on December 15, 1966 from lung cancer. In his 65 years, Walt Disney was arguably one of the most influential people in American history. The New York Times eulogized Walt as "probably the only man to have been praised by both the American Legion and the Soviet Union." <sup>66</sup> It is estimated that in 1966, 240 million people went to see a Disney movie, 100 million viewers tuned into a Disney television show, 80 million people read a Disney book, 50 million listened to a Disney record, 80 million bought Disney merchandise, 150 million read a Disney comic strip, and 7 million visited Disneyland. <sup>67</sup> All this from a little boy who just wanted to draw and to make his father proud.

So, out of the hundreds of photos of Walt Disney that Neal Gabler could have chosen for the cover of the biography of Walt Disney, he selected the picture that shows for the real Walt, the Walt that could not sit still in school yet could stay up for several days to finish a cartoon; the Walt that could not manage a successful business on his own yet was the head of one of the world's largest conglomerates; the Walt that despite his conflicted feelings towards his father, moved him to California, bought him a house and cared for him until his death. Gabler chose this picture to make his central assertion - Walt Disney is so much more than the kindly grandfather type of my youth and yet...At 44 I am still that little girl who would run home from school, grab her snack and listen raptly to all that the Mouseketeers had to teach her. I still believe that a dream is a wish your heart makes, that if I wish upon a star my wish will come true, and that it truly is a small world after all. The simple purity of Walt Disney is a key component of what makes me...me, and for that I will always whistle while I work.

## **Basic Structure of Class Time**

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My classes are arranged in an A/B block scheduling format. Every Friday I switch off between seeing A schedule one Friday and B schedule the next Friday. On Monday and Wednesday, I see group A and group B on Tuesday and Thursday for 90 - 100 minute blocks. Friday is utilized for whole group discussion and activities. On Monday through Thursday, the students are divided into groups of three to five. Each group rotates through four- twenty minute stations: whole-group, small-group, independent, and computer. The computer station is part of a prescribed reading program. This unit will be implemented during the whole group, small-group, and independent stations.

## Strategies

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### Guided Imagery

Photos evoke a sense of mood and convey meaning that penetrates deeper than conscious description can adequately convey. <sup>68</sup> According to Daniel Kahneman in *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, "The mental work that produces impressions, intuitions, and many decisions goes on in silence in our mind," <sup>69</sup> yet is influenced by experience. <sup>70</sup> This strategy is intended to fire up the subconscious and help make it conscious by using guided imagery to trigger sensory responses that can consciously add personal meaning and understanding to the image. Guided imagery is aimed at triggering visualization for students as they read. Guided imagery can be used as a pre-or post- reading activity depending upon the intended outcome of the activity. <sup>71</sup>

### Cooperative Learning

Cooperative learning is a broad term referring to the various methods of grouping students. Research has shown grouping students heterogeneously at least once a week has a positive impact upon learning. Cooperative learning promotes positive interdependence, face-to-face interaction, and interpersonal skills. In forming the groups, I need to be cognizant of not grouping strictly by ability but use other criteria as well. I will have no more than fifteen students in each class, therefore I will divide the students into three groups of no more than five. I will use a reading inventory, an attitude inventory, and personal interviews and observations as vehicles to determine the base long-term groups. I will use a variety of innocuous methods (birthday months, hair color, etc...) to form the formal and informal groups necessary in implementing the daily and weekly lesson plans. <sup>72</sup>

### Inquiry-Based Instruction

In inquiry-based instruction, the teacher acts as a facilitator of the activity versus the disseminator of information. Students seek out the knowledge and then present their knowledge for assessment in a way that best fits their learning style. The purpose of an inquiry is to enable the students to develop mental programs for applying their new-found knowledge and to wire the knowledge into their long term memory. <sup>73</sup>

## Activities

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### Imagination Tune Ups

To begin with I am going to divide the class in half. One half will remain in the classroom and the other half will go to the hallway. The half in the classroom will be asked to examine a unique or interesting object I have brought in. The students can handle the object and observe everything they can about it. I will ask them to view this item like a reporter - someone who can see something clearly enough to describe it to others in such a way the others think they have actually seen the item.

I will then bring in the students from the hallway and pair each one with a student from the class. Each student from the class will then describe the object to their partner. I will then reveal the object to the whole

class and we will compare the descriptions that were given. Part of the conversation will center around our ability notice details.

The next phase of the activity is to practice scene recall. The groups will switch (those who were in the classroom will now be in the hall and vice versa). The group in the classroom will be treated to a scene of another teacher coming to my room and us getting into a confrontation. The rest of the activity above will be repeated.

Lastly, I will guide them towards viewing the Little Rock Nine Picture by Will Counts. I will turn off the lights and close the blinds. I have pillows in the room so I am going to ask them to lie on the pillows and close their eyes while I talk to them about the events leading up to the event in the Little Rock Nine picture. I will encourage them to use all of their senses but sight to imagine the situation. I will then ask them to open their eyes to view the picture. We will then have a popcorn style of format for their reactions. The goal for the students to see the picture through the eyes of the background story.

### **A Picture Is Worth 1000 Words**

To begin with I am going to show the students a picture of an unknown little girl. I will ask them to brainstorm what they literally see and do not see. We will then make predictions about the little girl (i.e. what her life was like and how her life turned out). I will then show them another picture of the little girl except this time with her family. Does the new picture reinforce our predictions about the little girl or refute them? Do we need to amend our predictions based upon this new evidence. I will then tell them who the little girl is and then fill them in on the whole story about the girl in the picture.

Next, I will ask the students to take a picture of someone other than a family member or friend. The students will then use their imagination to write a short biography of the person in the picture. The goal is to practice storytelling.

For the next part of the activity, I will divide the students into small groups of 2-3 students. Each group will be assigned an iconic picture. The students will then use the laptop computers to research their picture. I will guide them on their search. The goal is to find out what is going on in the picture and why it is important. Each group will present their picture and story to the rest of the class.

Lastly, each student will choose their Brotherhood person by researching pictures and begin to conduct their research.

### **Two Walts**

This activity will be part of the 1000 words activity. After looking at the pictures of the little girl, I will show the students a picture of Former President Lyndon B. Johnson during WWII. I am counting on the students not knowing who the picture is of. We will continue our brainstorming and predicting process from the 1000 words activity. I will then tell the students what was happening at the time the picture was taken and what we now know of LBJ. We will then discuss whether the new information changes how we view the picture.

Next, I will divide the students into groups of 4-5. I will hand each group a blank KWL chart. Each group will then brainstorm what they know about Walt Disney and then write a list of questions they want to know. I will then Google pictures of Walt Disney. The students will see that literally hundreds of pictures come up and nearly all of them show Walt Disney in his later years with a big smile on his face. Does this picture confirm or



refute what we thought we knew about Walt Disney? Then focus on the picture that Neal Gabler used as the picture on the front cover of his biography of Disney. What is different in this picture? Why do they think Gabler chose this picture?

Using the laptop computers I will then guide the students through the process of using the district's online databases to begin looking up background information on Walt Disney. We will begin with the resource that is the simplest and progress through each progressive resource in order of difficulty. We will be using the Pyramid Diagram strategy <sup>74</sup>

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## Appendix

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### Common Core Standards addressed

This unit will be addressing Reading Anchor Standard 7: Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse formats and media, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words. In addition this unit will address writing standard 3: Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences. Lastly, this unit will address writing anchor standard 7: Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects based on focused questions, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.

## Notes

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1. Hamilton, p. 11
2. The students had to choose someone that had made a positive impact upon the world.
3. Dragnet was a television series in the 50s created by Jack Webb. A key phrase of the main character, Joe Friday, was "Just the facts, ma'am." Joe Friday did not want the witnesses embellishing the story.
4. The picture will be my 1<sup>st</sup> grade picture. In the picture, I am full of confidence. It is a month after this picture is taken that something traumatic happens in my life. The point is to brainstorm about the little girl before disclosing the trauma and see if that then affects their perceptions.
5. Lee, p. 1-2
6. Hamilton, Lee, Lomask, Nadel, Rollyson
7. Hamilton, p. 57
8. Lomask, p.4
9. Rollyson, p. 11
10. Hamilton, p. 21
11. Lomask, p. 2
12. Nadel, p. 1
13. Lomask, p. 1
14. Nadel, p. 10
15. Hamilton, p. 91

16. Lomask, p. 10
17. we are talking about a life which begins at birth and ends at death if the subject has already passed
18. by topic
19. Lomask, p. 41
20. Nadel, p.9
21. Lee, p. 6-18
22. Hamilton, p. 94
23. Rollyson
24. Caro, picture insert after page 62
25. Caro, p. 25
26. Caro, p. 25
27. Only 5 of the photos were submitted to the Library of Congress
28. At this point, Florence Owens Thompson was 32 years old and had been living on frozen vegetables from the surrounding fields and on the birds her children killed. In the few days before the photo she had had to sell the tires from her car to purchase food.  
Library of Congress.
29. Tougas, p. 38
30. Over 50% of my students are African American and Tulsa is only atwo hour drive from Little Rock, yet my students know little to nothing about this significant historical event.
31. Gabler
32. My sister had the same plate and glass in Mickey Mouse.
33. Gabler, p. 41
34. Gabler, p. 8-9
35. Gabler
36. Gabler, p. 6-7
37. Gabler, p. 10
38. Gabler, p. 14-15
39. Gabler

40. Gabler
41. Gabler, p. 23-24
42. Gabler; Watts
43. due to a lack of interest in anything that did not have to do with drawing or performing
44. Gabler
45. Watts, p. 18
46. Gabler; Stewart
47. Stewart
48. Watts, p. 26-27
49. Gabler; Watts
50. His friend and business partner in Kansas City. Walt realized early on in their relationship that Ub was actually a better and faster drawer than he was.
51. Stewart
52. Stewart; Watts
53. Walt truly never forgot the lessons from the paper route.
54. Watts
55. Stewart, p. 42-43
56. Lillian was one of the original inkers Walt had hired to work on the Alice shorts. She did not go with the others to work for Mintz. Walt always said he fell in love with Lillian's bright, bouncy curls because they matched her personality.
57. Another inadvertent lesson from his father
58. Gabler
59. Stewart
60. Stewart
61. Stewart
62. Stewart
63. Stewart
64. Stewart; Watts

65. Stewart
66. Gabler, p. xii
67. Ibid
68. Buehl, p. 84
69. Kahneman, p. 4
70. Mlodinow, p. 16
71. Buehl, p. 90
72. Buehl, Classroom Strategies
73. Ibid, p. K.3
74. Buehl, p. 131-132

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