



Wandering Through The Bad Times: Children Making Their Way Through the Great Depression

Curriculum Unit 15.01.01, published September 2015
by Joyce Arnosky

Introduction

As a new mother, I often took advantage of those rare moments in the late afternoon when my baby boy decided he'd had enough and finally closed his eyes to nap. I would sit on the stoop, enjoying the quiet interlude before the hubbub began again as dinnertime drew near. Often on these occasions I was joined by my elderly neighbor, Renee, who, with cigarette and coffee mug in hand, would dispense in her gravelly voice bits of wisdom on marriage and child rearing. On one occasion, however, she was uncharacteristically still, gazing off into the distance at what I could not even imagine. "What are you thinking about?" I asked. She paused a moment before answering. Turning slowly to face me she said, " I ever tell you about the time when I was a kid and I came home late from work and there was nobody, no nothin' in the house. Everybody, everything, just gone. Gone."

"This was 1932," she continued, "mind you, this was during the Great Depression and I was eleven years old." As the story unfolded I learned that she had gone to work at the mill, as she usually did -no school for her - there were mouths to feed and everyone who could work, did work. She returned late at night to find the house dark and empty of everything save a can of beans and a can opener placed in the middle of the floor. There was not even a hastily scribbled explanation tucked away in a secret place, nor whispered messages from neighbors on the lookout for her return. So eleven- year old Renee sat alone on the floor of a house empty of everything. Waiting. Just after midnight her sister crept through the window to fetch her and bring her to the family's new digs. Her folks had not been able to pay the rent, so they'd left. They had decided not to tell her for fear that somehow she might give them away.

This story has stayed with me these many years. I connect to it as a parent as I can imagine and associate it with the anguish of leaving a child behind. On another level, it is my reference point for a period of history I had only read about, but that I now understand more completely in the terms of its human costs.

This story *is* history, but it will never find its way into a textbook. All history texts tell the story primarily through the actions and reactions of the adults. But children are part of the story as well, as Renee's story illustrates. They live their lives in tandem with the adults, albeit experiencing the events in ways particular to their sensibilities. Rarely, if ever, do the histories stop to tell the story from the youngest members of that society, to represent it through their eyes.

Overview

This is a four-week interdisciplinary unit created for fifth graders in a self-contained classroom in an urban district, but it can easily be modified for the upper grades as well. Our school is home to speakers of 32 languages other than English. As is often the case in our particular setting, reading levels and literacy skills in any classroom can range from students who are more than two years below grade level to students who are two or more years above grade level. Because this unit is designed to be taught in the literacy and social studies blocks, consideration has been given to creating activities and providing materials that will allow all students to access the content as well as the skills and strategies required to become stronger and more perceptive readers of fiction and nonfiction. Math activities and creative and visual arts opportunities will also be included. Our district has adopted the Common Core and the unit is aligned with the Core's Reading Literature and Reading Informational Texts objectives: In literature, reading for literal meaning, comprehending, inferring, synthesizing, and paying attention to craft structure and language; for informational text, students must not only be able to read in such a way as to "get" the text, but they must also be able to investigate an author's claims, use reasoning and evidence as well as integrate knowledge and ideas across texts and different media.

Content Objectives

Instructional time is precious, given our district's intense focus on the high stakes areas of literacy and mathematics, and there is little room at the curricular table for history/social studies. It is a required subject, but given the time constraints, it gets short shrift. This, I think, is a mistake. Studying history- reading history, thinking like a historian, analyzing events - offers both teachers and students rich opportunities for engaging in the best types of literacy experiences. Although the focus of this unit is the Great Depression as seen through the eyes of children, the work that students do and the habits of mind they develop will be transferable to the study of any historical period. Through this unit students will learn to think like historians. Just what does that entail? Well, if you were asked to describe a very famous painting in the Louvre based on what you were able to discern through a one inch hole, you might be able to say that there are landscape elements, a garment possibly, and likely a figure of some sort. You would not be able to describe or understand the *Mona Lisa* in all its glorious complexity without having been able to examine it from many vantage points - paint, texture, perspective, background and context. Looking at a historical event or period and understanding it fully (or as fully as is possible) requires this multi-faceted approach as well. Historians don't simply rely on one account. They analyze many sources, both primary and reliable secondary ones, and consider events from numerous perspectives as they work "to make a plausible story out of a congeries of "facts" which, in their unprocessed form, make no sense at all." (Collingwood 1978)

History can be a dry and dusty place especially for children if they travel to the past with only a dreary textbook as their guide. They won't see themselves represented, nor will they have a sense of the times. They won't know what it was like to have to work full time at age eleven, to share a pair of shoes with your brother, or to see your strong father cry. They won't know the excitement of being on your own and riding the rails at thirteen to places unknown and adventures yet to be revealed. There is a wide range of ways to consider a historical period. It is, after all, a result of multiple narratives layered one upon the other. Making history a

journey worth taking for students requires using engaging fiction and informational texts – novels, songs, and poems, alongside memoir, photos, primary sources and even the dreaded textbook. This is a way to merge the necessary literacy skills and strategies with thinking and understanding in order to better grasp content more deeply and create individuals who are literate in all areas. Students will be doing this type of intellectual work as they immerse themselves in meaningful literacy activities as they read and write across fiction and informational texts and writing genres.

Rationale

The adoption and implementation of the Common Core State Standards by almost all states has not been without drama. The Core’s literacy standards require students to read a lot more nonfiction. In the elementary grades the split is equal amounts of fiction and nonfiction. In the upper grades the requirement is 30% fiction and 70% nonfiction. A hue and cry arose when English teachers believed that the ratios devalued fiction and would result in their having to abandon the longer fictional works that make up the cannon of upper school literature – Shakespeare and his fellows- and substitute “memos, technical manuals, recipes, and train schedules.” Though it was clarified that the 70% requirement was to be across all content areas, many were still not appeased or convinced of the math. What ensued was what Mosle referred to as a “fiction vs. nonfiction smack down.”

Why should we read fiction? Children come to reading through stories – the nursery rhymes, fairy tales, and bedtime stories told or read. The structure or grammar of the narrative is embedded/imprinted early on. “We have a craving for narrative...It is the deep structure of all good writing. *All good writing*. We struggle with writers who dispense with narrative form and simply present information because we are given no frame for comprehension.” (Newkirk 2012)

Imaginative literature is powerful, eloquent and transcends classification. The best works plumb the depths of the human condition, exploring the issues that touch us all – love, loss, family ties, courage, determination, and making one’s way in the world. These works enable readers, especially younger readers, to examine powerful social issues in thoughtful, meaningful ways, to “try on” different personas, appreciate exquisite language, to think about large themes, and ultimately gain insights into our lives and those of others. This is important literacy and life work.

The effects of reading fiction, as it turns out, are far more significant than only the pleasure and meaning we derive from our novels, poems, and short stories. Contemporary research in psychology and brain function shows that reading great literature ...enlarges and improves us as human beings. (Paul 2012) Extensive studies of the effects of reading fiction conducted by K.Oatley and reported in a 2011 issue of *Scientific American* indicate several measurable outcomes. “Research shows that reading stories can actually improve your social skills...It builds empathy and can even change your personality.” (Beers and Probst 2014.) So, great news! Not only is reading fiction lots of fun, it is also good for you. What better reason can one have for reading fiction? And lots of it.

All well and good, the nonfiction side replies, but “will it help you win the corner office”? This quip by Sara Mosle (2012) is meant to be facetious, but it carries within it more than a grain of truth. It implies, and many would agree, that reading nonfiction requires greater intellectual effort. Newkirk points out that conventional

wisdom says that we use radically different reading skills when we read or write texts that are called informational, analytic, or argumentative...that moving toward these texts (and away from narrative) should be a feature of high school and college reading. The clear message in the common core literacy standards is that narrative reading is to be reduced in the upper grades and that college-ready students need to master the more demanding tasks of reading texts that are not narrative.(see Coleman and Pimental, 2011) That somehow makes it more valuable, and consequently greater emphasis and time should be allotted in class for this “serious older brother” of the literacy genres. Add to the argument Plato’s banishment of the poets, and you have the underpinnings of a compelling argument favoring a strong emphasis on nonfiction.

We read different genres for different purposes. While we read fiction for enjoyment and the wild run it gives our imagination, a lot of the reading we do in the real world is nonfiction. We undoubtedly read to get information – to learn new things, satisfy our curiosity, and to generally understand and deal with the world around us. So the ability to read and understand and use what we’ve learned is a very important skill and can’t be discounted or dismissed. The Common Core, by requiring the addition of greater amounts of nonfiction in the curriculum across grade levels, acknowledges this.

It is a fact supported by research that the more students read, the better their reading skills, especially if they get an early start. They build their vocabulary and general knowledge. “In other words...those who read a lot will enhance their verbal intelligence; that is, reading will make them smarter.” (Cunningham and Stanovich 2001) Recently researchers have begun to uncover that it is not just how much students read that matters, but also what they read. In particular, students need to read and comprehend informational texts as often and as fluently as they do narrative texts. (Goodwin and Miller 2013) Reading content rich nonfiction helps students build strong vocabulary and background knowledge about their world – two elements that are essential to them as they move up grades and are required to effectively handle more complex, content specific reading. It can, however, be just as cogently argued that reading fiction does as good a job if not better of building vocabulary and background knowledge. Fiction and informational texts really do have a mutually beneficial relationship. Reading literature, in addition to its inherent purpose, can act as a bridge to help or encourage a student to read in the content area. It can generate interest in a subject and may lead a child to investigate a topic about which he previously had no interest. Having the background knowledge gleaned from the novel helps to better understand the informational text. For other students who prefer not to read fiction and who have strong interests in subjects covered by informational texts, having more exposure in the curriculum and classroom may motivate them to read more. In turn, what they read in nonfiction may help or lead them to better understand and enjoy literature.

Part of the resistance towards introducing more nonfiction into the reading curriculum has to do with the fact that students just don’t do very well with it. That has to do with limited exposure to the genre and its varied structures. Thomas Newkirk, writing about the narrative structure of exceptional nonfiction noted, “We never really read for raw information. We can’t. So called “informational texts” work only when the writer has been able to establish a set of expectations to drive the reading...This frame stabilizes the reading, gives it purpose, provides a pattern to place the “information” in.” As students increasingly immerse themselves in nonfiction, they need to be taught to look at the overall text structure – the frame. The various text structures of nonfiction function like the narrative grammar with which students are so familiar. They need to be able to link specifics in order to come away with new understandings. Without perceiving a structure, a reader’s mind responds to isolated items and pings all over the place. What’s needed is a process of close in attention to detail with a pulled back understanding of the whole. (Calkins 2010)

So who wins the smack down? What should reading look like in the classroom? How do we resolve this conflict

between fiction and nonfiction? Is there really a conflict? I think in reading the Common Core, one can see that it essentially promotes and supports reading competently and with understanding across multiple genres. If we agree with Gardner that the purpose of education is to enhance understanding, then it's not really an either/or situation. As teachers we want to break ideas and topics wide open for our students. We want to enhance their knowledge, show them different perspectives and enable them to broaden their worldview - ("There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of in your philosophy...") Teachers can do this by thoughtfully and carefully choosing fiction and nonfiction texts that may be linked - in surprising and unexpected ways, but can be read together. Teachers need to model how to read and think about these seemingly unrelated texts - they need to train students to actively look for the connections among the various texts. This demonstrates for students how one text informs and enriches one's understanding of the other and how they both contribute to a deeper understanding of the topic as a whole.

Fiction? Nonfiction? All that really matters is that the writing is good writing and that attention and energy are given to the texts, exploring deeply and thoughtfully the works' subtleties and implications. (Beers and Probst).

Background

The Great Depression dominated the period between the two world wars, blighting millions of lives with poverty and hopelessness...The experience of this depression would color the way most people thought about the relationship between economics and politics for the rest of the 20th century, and it still haunts us today. (Downing 2011)

In the 1920s in America, optimism and economic prosperity seemed to be in limitless supply. The stock market rose steadily during this period. It seemed that everyone could get rich, not just the Wall Street investment types. You could buy shares of stock in the market for \$100 and turn around and sell them, days later for \$200. During this period, investment houses made it even easier to become shareholders. It was known as buying on margin. You could buy \$100 worth of stock and only pay \$10 for it. The \$90 difference was essentially a loan from the stockbroker. When you sold your stock for \$200 (or possibly even more!) you would repay the broker and still have a tidy profit. This seemed like an easy, no-risk method to get in on the boom. You'd be foolish not to.

Many people of modest means were enticed to cash in their savings and invest in the market. Everyone was doing it and the money flowed -until the bottom fell out.

In early September of 1929, prices of shares in the stock market began to slip. There was some correction and things seemed to be on the upswing again. In late October, however, several waves of selling occurred, culminating in "Black Tuesday" - October 29 - a day J.K.Galbraith called "the most devastating day in the history of the markets." On this day more than 16 million shares were sold for a mere fraction of their original value. Those who had invested were ruined. Those who had bought on margin were even worse off. Not only had they lost the value of their stocks, they were now in the position of having to immediately repay those "loans" to the broker with no means to do so, other than selling the car or, worse yet, their home. The world had changed overnight.

America had experienced economic downturns (depressions) before. Usually it affected the poorest individuals. This was different. It hurt rich and poor alike and there seemed no way out. Though the crash of the stock market affected less than 5% of the population directly, its ripple effects were profound and far-reaching.

Like American investors, European banks and financial institutions were lured into the market by the possibility of making lots of money quickly. And, as a result, when the U.S. market crashed, the Europeans suffered too. Their losses, however, were much worse because of the fact that the post World War I economy had been set up like a set of dominoes. Germany needed to borrow huge sums of money in order to bolster its own economy and pay war reparations to England and France. When the market crashed, U.S. banks demanded immediate repayment of these loans. Unable to comply, German banks and industries went bankrupt, millions were laid off and inflation soared. Germany stopped paying reparations to England and France, but President Hoover refused to cancel their war debts to the United States. As these countries struggled, unemployment rose there as well. By the mid-1920s the countries of the world were inextricably linked through manufacturing and trade. Prices for raw materials fell, credit was hard to get and as countries raised their tariffs on imported goods, world trade was reduced. Not even the most remote corner of the world was left untouched by the disaster created "because a few people had been overcome with gambling fever in lands beyond their horizon."

In the cities, unemployment was the most immediate and devastating effect of the crash. Companies, having lost their investment money, were no longer hiring. Worse yet, they were laying off workers. Consumers had no money to buy goods, so more workers were laid off. Banks that had experienced collapse as people ran to withdraw their savings demanded payment from their customers of outstanding loans and mortgages. With no money to pay, people had to leave their homes and move to cheaper apartments. Some were lucky enough to be able to move in with better off relatives. Those not so fortunate found themselves seeking shelter in the many shantytowns that sprang up on the edges of town - Hoovervilles. (Named after the President who seemed oblivious to the hardships of the American people.) By 1933 more than one million people were living in these shacks made of old boxes and boards.

The people in the countryside fared only slightly better during this period. Many were able to at least grow their own food. But if the bank held the mortgage on the farm, it was in jeopardy. If you could not sell your produce, there was no money to pay the taxes or the mortgage. That forced many farm families off the land and into the cities in search of increasingly scarce jobs.

Many farmers had not been good stewards of the land. In America at that time, land seemed limitless, so they cut down trees, cut up sod, and used the land until it no longer yielded crops. And then they moved on. Farmers in Europe had been practicing crop rotation for years, but in America there was so much land, why bother? This failure to care for the land coupled with successive years of severe drought that turned the topsoil to dust created the perfect conditions for the devastating dust storms that roared across the Great Plains - "terrifying, vast, impenetrable black clouds that turned noon black as midnight", as one reporter described it.

The dust storms just blew farms away, killed animals, buried homes, and sickened children. Families could no longer live in this barren wasteland and were forced to move on. They endured unimaginable hardships as they headed North and West in hopes of finding land to work, jobs, or simply food and shelter. "It was a time of national calamity." (Hakim 1995)

Woody Guthrie, perhaps more than anyone else during this time, chronicled the lives of the people of the

Great Depression. His songs served as poignant social commentary and protest. Most students are familiar with “This Land is My Land,” but might not necessarily know it as a protest song. The first three verses and the chorus describe a beautiful America, filled with promise. In the final three verses Guthrie criticizes the greed he sees all around him and the failed promise of America. His “I Ain’t Got No Home in This World Anymore” is a critique of America’s business culture – the people who were responsible for the country’s pain and suffering. It reflects the heightened awareness of the disparity between the classes and shows the growing anger of working class people. Much of what he wrote can be applied to conditions in the country today – homelessness, foreclosures, business failures, and the widening gulf between the rich and the poor and would be a springboard for a meaningful discussion comparing and contrasting the two historical periods.

Conditions continued to worsen until Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s election in 1933. Roosevelt’s New Deal policies brought a new way of thinking about a government’s responsibilities towards its people – especially in times of great need. Up until then, it was believed that the government should not support the people and as a result there were no social safety nets in place. Though the policies and measures incorporated in his New Deal did not remedy the country’s situation overnight, they did at least loosen the economic and social stranglehold and gave Americans a glimmer of hope.

There are volumes and volumes written about the Great Depression. This brief overview is intended to provide a context for the content and lessons that make up this unit.

Teaching Strategies

Looking at history as a historian and thinking like a historian are the overarching strategies of this unit. Historians don’t accept one version of the facts. They see themselves as detectives, searching through many sources for the evidence that will solve or at least shed some light on the mystery of the past. They know there are multiple layers to be examined and that there is a relationship among them. They form questions and argue about what the facts show about the past and what they can mean for the present. For example, Dr. Liu (2015) noted, as historians delve into Ellis Island, they are confronted with differing interpretations of its significance. Is it meant to represent a symbol of hope and opportunity, or is it a relic of our nativism and xenophobia?

The strategies used in historical thinking align closely with those used to build literacy skills. The Common Core standards for reading literature and for reading informational text are similar: students are required to read for key ideas and details; read for craft and structure, and read to integrate knowledge and ideas. In every standard and across all grade levels, students are required to understand that literature is more than about plot and that informational texts are about more than just the facts. Both demand an intense analysis of the text in order to fully understand.

Students will use close reading for many of the texts. This puts the emphasis on readers figuring out what the text says by rereading it several times, each time with a different purpose. The first read is to understand what the text is saying explicitly. The second read would focus on how the text works – its structure, word choice, evidence presented. The final reading is for the heart of the text. Students begin to understand the connections to other texts and what it has to say to the reader.

This same strategy will be used in examining photographs. Much of what we know about the Great Depression we know from the eloquent photographs of artists such as Dorothea Lange and Walker Evans. These artists worked under the auspices of the Farm Security Administration (FSA), a New Deal program commissioned to not only provide work for them, but to document our society as it struggled through the Great Depression. Students will expand their literacy skills to “reading” these photographs. They will be assigned to a small group and each group will receive a picture to analyze. Proceeding slowly as they would in doing a close reading of a written text, they will examine the photos, noticing details, making connections and posing and answering questions. They will try to determine what is going on in each picture. What is the backstory?

Music is a wonderful primary source for students to investigate. It is engaging, immediate, and provides an immediate emotional connection. Most cultures use music as an accompaniment to significant life events. Music provides students with “direct access to a written cultural artifact” directly in their classroom. The pictures will be paired with the lyrics of a Woody Guthrie song – one of his ballads of the Dust Bowl. Since a ballad is a story told to music, students will read and analyze the song as they would a poem. They will write the story of the song as a prose piece. They may also choose to write a ballad of their own and put it to the music of a popular song. Many of Woody Guthrie’s songs were protest songs and students will understand this genre as they will do a close reading of all the verses of “This Land is My Land,”

An important strategy is aligning fiction with nonfiction pieces in a careful, thoughtful way so that students can read each work and understand the topic/idea more fully. In this unit, students will read two novels: *Bud, Not Buddy*, by Christopher Paul Curtis and *Out of the Dust*, by Karen Hesse. Each book tells the story of a child who is enduring the harsh realities of the Depression. Curtis’ book is historical fiction and has as its protagonist an orphaned boy who is searching for his father. Hesse’s novel is written in free verse and tells the story of a girl from Oklahoma who remains on the family farm through it all. Students will read both novels in book club groups. In these small groups, they will analyze the literary elements of each, talk with one another and then respond to writing prompts and create questions for the group to explore. Their discussions should be especially rich because of the informational reading that will provide them with background knowledge. Students may use a strategy that encourages participation of all group members. Students pick a significant line from their reading, write it down on a card and explain on the back why the line or phrase has special meaning for him. In turn, students put the phrase out there, everyone discusses it and the person whose line it is gets to have the last word and explain the connection he made.

Once all the groups have completed their reading of the novels, we will discuss both in a literature circle format.

Writing and researching make up a large part of the work students will be doing throughout this unit. Once they have read the core text: *Children of the Great Depression*, they will choose a topic and read more about it on their own. Students will learn how to look for reliable sources- both electronic and print. They will learn how to take notes and use them to create an informational essay, always a difficult task. To help students with this extended essay format, one of the strategies will be to use a graphic organizer to set out the thesis statement, main idea and supporting details, and the conclusion. One of the rationales for reading nonfiction is that it helps students in their own writing by providing good models of the genre. This should be made explicit at the outset of the unit so that as they read, they are actively noticing the author’s craft, in terms of organization/structure, word choice and evidence presented to support ideas presented. These essays will be the basis of a lesson each student will teach to the class. This strategy requires that the writer be mindful of a different audience – one’s peers- and this might result in a more dynamic piece of prose. As a result of their research and writing, each student is now an expert on the topic and the presentation piece will require them

to use their creativity in designing a poster, photo display, or presenting an artifact to accompany their lesson.

Poetry figures in this unit through the novel and the songs and nonfiction through the narrative text and memoirs. One of the strategies I would like to use to break down the barriers between fiction and nonfiction is to comingle poetry with narrative text in a form of poetry known as a “found poem”. In this type of poem, the writer chooses a piece of text and finds the poetry within it by deleting words and rearranging them on the page in ways that look like poetry – short lines, single words, and sound like poetry- creating a rhythm or cadence by the spacing and line breaks. This strategy works well in getting reluctant writers to allow themselves the freedom to create poems when they didn’t believe they had it in them. Students would use the memoirs from Studs Terkel’s *Hard Times* or children’s letters to Mrs. Roosevelt. These works are poignant and poetic in the telling and would lend themselves to this type of writing.

Another writing strategy is the use of a journal throughout. There is a lot to think about in the content of this unit and students need what poet Paul Janeczko refers to as “a place my words are looking for” – some place for their thinking and reflecting and their questions. This would be a personal journal, but would also provide an opportunity for students to respond to assigned prompts and quick writes on various topics and issues. Very often the writing and thinking students do is lost to them as papers that are graded and returned are stuffed into notebooks, desks and book-bags, never again to see the light of day. A journal provides a record, an artifact of the thinking and learning one did. Students are often surprised when they look back at the quantity and quality of their work. It is a good reminder for them of their potential and accomplishments.

Finally, the culminating project will help students put all the pieces together. It requires that students demonstrate what they have learned throughout the unit. Though they may choose from a variety of presentation models – I-movie, a one act play, a piece of artwork, a graphic novel, an “interview” with a migrant family, their final project should contain elements of both fiction and nonfiction, woven together so as to show how each genre works to help create a full picture of the people of that time and place.

Classroom Activities

Activity One - Getting Started

Introduce the unit to students by asking them what they know about the period in American history known as the Great Depression. Record student responses and save for review at the conclusion of the unit.

If you have a Smartboard, record their responses and create a “Wordle” (wordle.net)

The words are arbitrarily arranged by the site in a visually intriguing pattern.

It is possible to do something similar using a transparency and an overhead projector.

Explain to students that they will be studying this period like historians – trying to learn all they can to figure out what was going on back then. Ask students what they think historians would have to do? What would they have to look at? What would they have to read? Where would they get this information?

As you record their responses, sort them into two unlabeled columns. (Primary sources/Secondary sources).

Ask students to explain why there are two columns and the difference between them. If necessary explain or clarify the terms and the process of using many and varied sources.

Give students an overview of the work they'll be doing. Emphasize that they will be reading a combination of informational text and historical fiction. They will also be writing, researching, teaching, and completing a culminating project that will include literary and creative elements.

Introduce the Great Depression through a montage of photos accompanied by music of the time. (I Movie or overhead transparencies) Have students record their thoughts, reactions, and questions and ask for their responses at the conclusion. Provide a quick summary of the period.

Assign students to groups of 4 with each student getting a number from 1-4.

In their groups, they will partner read chapters 15 and 16 from J. Hakim's, *A History of US-Vol.9 All That Jazz*, one chapter at a time.

For each chapter, they are to work with their group to discuss and come up with:

1 Big Idea

2 Questions they still have

3 Things that surprised and or interested them

4 Vocabulary words or terms they did not know and needed to look up

Responses are to be written down by the recorder chosen by the group.

At the conclusion of the period, the information in the chapter will be debriefed.

All the numbers from each group will meet with their counterparts and discuss their responses, choose a spokesperson, and then present to the class when called upon.

Questions and vocabulary and terms will be written on sentence strips and posted in the room as reminders of what they want to find out and what they've learned.

At the conclusion of the background readings, ask students if there is a point of view that was missing. Elicit from them that it was the children whose experiences were not represented. Make clear that this unit will show history through the voices of the children who lived during these tough times.

Introduce students to the main texts of the unit:

Literary nonfiction

Children of the Great Depression, by Russell Freedman

Students will do close readings of these chapters, analyze and understand text structure to interpret information, and respond to teacher created text-dependent questions which will be discussed as a class.

Students will choose a topic from the book and, with a partner, research further, using two other sources,

write a report, and teach a lesson about their topic.

Historical Fiction

Bud, Not Buddy, by Christopher Paul Curtis

Out of the Dust, by Karen Hesse

Students will be divided and each group will read both novels in book club groups, analyzing literary elements, discussing the questions they have created for each other as well as responding to prompts.

Suggestions for Additional Lessons

Math

The crash of the stock market played an important part in creating the conditions for the Great Depression. Students can do a simulation of the stock market transactions and how it functioned at that time in order to better understand how the crash came about; create graphs tracking the stock prices of shares of well know companies over a period of the months prior to the Crash of 1929; create and solve word problems based on the amount of money that could be made and lost on stocks during the years of 1928-1929.

Literacy

Though it is important to study the past, it is equally important to use those lessons to inform the present. It is a little known fact that there are more homeless children in New York City today than there were during the Depression. Andrea Elliott's *New YorkTimes* article: " Girl in the Shadows: Dasani's Homeless Life" follows one such child. Students could grapple with the issues they encounter in this text. How is this similar to what we've been studying? What can be done? By Whom? These are big questions and would provide an opportunity to draw on information from multiple print sources in order to explore a far-reaching problem.

Activity Two - Using Photographs

Materials needed:

One for each group of 3-4 students:

Copies of photographs from the Farm Security Administration (FSA) Collection

www.loc.gov/pictures/search/FSA/OWI Documenting America or

Copies of photographs from *Children of the Great Depression*, by Russell Freedman

(Note: Photos should feature children prominently and should be page- size so details are easily discernable)

Chart paper and markers

Student journals

Before sending students off to work in their preassigned small groups, we will have a whole class discussion about close reading. What do you do when you do a close reading of a text? (Procedure) What is the purpose

of doing a close reading? I want students to understand that they will be doing the same type of work with a photograph as the text.

Remind students that historians use a variety of sources to try to understand the past. If they're not sure, remind them of the differences between primary and secondary sources. Ask students to explain what type of source a photo would be considered and why they think so.

Have students examine the photo and note in their journals their response to the following:

1. What is going on in the photo?
2. What details can you point to that provide evidence to support your statement?
3. What connections can you make to what you've learned so far?
4. Why do you think it was taken? What was the photographer trying to convey?
5. What questions come to mind as you looked at the photo? Come up with 3 to discuss with your group.
6. What is the backstory? If this is a still from a movie, what will happen next?

Once students have had a chance to examine the photos and respond in their journals, groups will share among themselves their thoughts and questions.

Each group will choose a spokesperson to briefly present their analysis to the rest of the class. (Photos should be shown on the smartboard or projected from transparencies from the overhead.)

Following each group's presentation, reconvene the class and consider the following questions:

1. What did we learn about the period from looking at the photographs?
2. How is studying photos of a period different from using other types of materials?

Activity Three - Woody Guthrie, Balladeer of the Great Depression: Music as a primary source

Materials:

Copies of the lyrics to "This Land is Your Land" (Copy chorus and first three stanzas on the front and the last three on the reverse side)

Copies of "Dust Storm Disaster" (also known as "The Great Dust Storm")

Large pieces of butcher paper or poster size pieces with an outline map of the United States drawn on it

Markers, crayons, paints

Access to youtube.com or other means of hearing the song

Begin the lesson with a class discussion of the following questions:

1. How many of you enjoy listening to music?
2. Why do you listen to music?
3. How does music make you feel?
4. Do you think you can learn anything from music? If so, what?

Remind students of the earlier discussion of primary and secondary sources. What kind of source is a song?

Explain.

Play a small part of “This Land is Your Land” and ask students if they know the song and what they know about it. Tell them it was written by Woody Guthrie. Provide some biographical information along with images from various aspects of his life projected on the board.

Play the chorus and first stanza of the song and have only the lyrics to this portion on the board. Have students think about what vision of America is portrayed in the lyrics. In small groups, have them draw these images on the map. Continue in the same way for the next two stanzas. Ask students to describe what we could learn or say about America from these lyrics and record their responses. Sing the song as a class- great fun especially if someone can play the guitar.

Have students read the last three verses. Do a close reading of these verses. Consider tone, imagery, author’s purpose.

Explain that this is a protest song – a type of music that is meant to call attention to something that is wrong and must be changed.

How do these connect to what we’ve been reading?

Why did Woody Guthrie split the song? Why do we only know the first half?

Could the verses have been placed in different order? How would this have affected the theme of the song? What can we learn or say about America from these lyrics? From the song as a whole?

Students will do a close reading of “Dust Storm Disaster” stanza by stanza; listen to a recording of Woody Guthrie singing the song and watch a movie clip of a dust storm moving through. They can then write a news report describing the event using the lyrics and movie.

Additional Activity

Students can create a song in ballad form that raises awareness of an issue that is important in their lives. Their lyrics can put to the karaoke version of a popular song and performed for the class or recited.

Appendix on Implementing Pennsylvania Common Core Standards-English Language Arts

Appendix A

CC.1.2.5.D Analyze multiple accounts of the same event or topic, noting important similarities and differences in the point of view they represent. (Reading informational text)

CC.1.3.5.D Analyze multiple accounts of the same event or topic, noting important similarities and differences in the point of view they represent. (Reading fiction)

CC.1.3.5.A Determine a theme of a text from details in the text, including how characters in a story or drama

respond to challenges or how the speaker in a poem reflects upon a topic; summarize the text.

CC.1.3.5.B Cite textual evidence by quoting accurately from the text to explain what the text says explicitly and make inferences.

CC.1.4.5.A Write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas and information clearly.

CC.1.4.5.C Develop the topic with facts, definitions, concrete details, quotations, or other information and examples related to the topic; include illustrations and multimedia when useful to aiding comprehension.

This unit addresses each of the English Language Arts Standards listed above. Students will be reading multiple accounts of the Great Depression including informational texts, memoirs, letters and literary nonfiction as well as historical fiction and will be able to understand and analyze the similarities and differences in the points of view represented. They will read fiction and understand the literary elements, be able to explain what is happening explicitly as well as infer the text's deeper meaning. They will be able to support their thinking by citing appropriate evidence from the text. Students will write informative texts as they choose topics to research and teach their classmates. Their lessons and culminating project will also incorporate the use of multimedia such as iMovie, slide shows or power-point presentations.

Resources for Students

Cohen, Robert, ed., *Dear Mrs. Roosevelt: Letters From Children of the Great Depression*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001.

This is a collection of letters written to the First Lady by poor children asking for her help for things as varied as finding jobs for parents to a dress for graduation. It provides a glimpse into the lives of these youngest victims of America's most difficult economic time.

Curtis, Christopher Paul. *Bud, Not Buddy*. New York: Dell Yearling, 1999.

This is the story of ten year old Bud. His mother has died, but he believes she left a clue as to his father and he sets out in Depression era Flint, Michigan to try to find him. It offers insights into the times along with a great story and deep characterizations.

Downing, David. *The Great Depression*. Chicago: Heineman, 2001.

This provides very good, easily accessible background information on the Great Depression.

Freedman, Russell. *Children of the Great Depression*. New York: Sandpiper, 2010.

This is an excellent book that provides information and insights through photographs and literate text into the lives of the children who lived through this period. It details the hardships, but also casts light on some of the fun they had.

Hakim, Joy. *A History of Us. Book Nine: War, Peace, and All That Jazz*. New York: Oxford University, 1995.

Hakim tells history like a master storyteller. It is filled with interesting bits of little known information to illuminate the major events. This is a wonderful, readable source.

Hesse, Karen. *Out of the Dust*. New York: Scholastic, 1997.

This is a novel written in free verse. It is a first person account about a girl who has to deal with the loss of her mother, her father's grief, and a horrific accident. It is set in the bleak environs of Depression era Oklahoma. This is a very moving novel.

Terkel, Studs. *Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1970.

This is a compilation of the memories of children, artists, business, politicians, and just plain folks who lived through the Depression. It provides a full, rich picture of a very difficult time.

Internet Resources

"Getting Ready For Our New Research Library...." Woody Guthrie Center RSS. Accessed July 11, 2015. <http://woodyguthriecenter.org/>.

This is the official site. It provides information about his music and his times. It seeks to extend his legacy to inspire others to express themselves.

"Prints & Photographs Online Catalog." Prints & Photographs Online Catalog. Accessed July 25, 2015. <http://www.loc.gov/pictures>.

Documenting America—Library of Congress website for photographs taken during the Great Depression

"Teachers." Teacher Resources. Accessed July 25, 2015. <http://www.loc.gov/teachers/>.

Library of Congress site that provides information, lessons and links to other resources.

"Teaching History.org, Home of the National History Education Clearinghouse." Teaching Materials. Accessed July 9, 2015. <http://teachinghistory.org/teaching-materials>.

This is an excellent source for social studies teachers. It provides lessons and links to little known resources.

Resources for Teachers

Beers, Kylene, and Robert E. Probst. *Notice and Note: Strategies for Close Reading*. Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2013.

This book offers insights for teachers to help students successfully deal with the complex texts they encounter as the Common Core is implemented

Calkins, Lucy, Ehrenworth, Mary, and Christopher Lehman. *Pathways to the CommonCore: Accelerating Achievement*. Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2012.

The authors have set about trying to make the Common Core accessible to teachers and to help them enhance their literacy practices in order to meet the demands of these standards.

Calkins, Lucy, and Kathleen Tolan. *Navigating Nonfiction in Expository Text: Determining Importance and Synthesizing*. Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2010.

This book discusses the importance of nonfiction and provides lessons and strategies for helping students read, write, and think well in this genre.

Gallagher, Kelly. *Deeper Reading: Comprehending Challenging Texts, 4-12*. Portland: Stenhouse. 2004.

The author offers strategies for helping students delve deeper into the texts they are reading.

Works Cited

Cunningham, Anne E., and Keith E. Stanovich. "What Reading Does for the Mind." *Journal of Direct Instruction*. Vol.1, No.2 (2001): 137-149.

This study supports what literacy teachers have always known: Reading more makes you smarter.

Goncherr, Michael. "Ten Intriguing Photographs to Teach Close Reading and Visual Thinking Skills." <http://learning.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/02>

The author demonstrates how to get students to look at photographs and really see into the heart of the matter. No captions required.

Goodwin, Bryan, and Kirsten Miller. "Research Says Nonfiction Reading Promotes Student Success." *Educational Leadership* <http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/dec12/vol70/num04/nonfiction-R> (accessed June 23, 2015).

This article makes the case for reading more informational texts.

Mosle, Sara. "What Should Children Read." *New York Times*, November 22, 2012, accessed May 8, 2015, <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/11/22/what-should-c...>

The author discusses the controversy surrounding the Common Core's prescription that students read much more informational text.

Newkirk, Thomas. "How We Really Comprehend Nonfiction." *Educational Leadership*, <http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/mar12/vol69/num06/how-we-really-comprehend-nonfiction> (accessed June 23, 2015).

This is an excellent article about the fiction vs nonfiction debate. In a sentence: "Although we tend to downplay the importance of narrative, nonfiction is all about plot."

Seiber, Ellen. "Teaching With Photographs: Approaches." Mathers Museum of World Cultures. www.indiana.edu/mathers/tops.

This museum educator offers suggestions for using photographs in the classroom to enliven lessons.

Wineburg, Sam. "Thinking Like a Historian." www.loc.gov/teachers/tps/quarterly/historical_thinking/pdf/historical_thinking.pdf. (accessed June 23, 2015).

The author offers suggestions on how to do history with students so that the process is engaging, meaningful, and authentic. His suggestions are very much like what a literacy teacher might craft.

Zukas, Alex. "Different Drummers: Using Music to Teach

History." [http://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories.perspectives-on...](http://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on...) (Accessed June 23, 2015).

The author explains how music is important to a cultural and is a primary source for any era that can be accessed in any classroom.

<https://teachers.yale.edu>

©2023 by the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, Yale University, All Rights Reserved. Yale National Initiative®, Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute®, On Common Ground®, and League of Teachers Institutes® are registered trademarks of Yale University.

For terms of use visit https://teachers.yale.edu/terms_of_use