



An Inheritance of Cultural Storytelling: Nature-Inspired Paintings

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Introduction

N. Scott Momaday can be quoted as saying, "...Will I give my children an inheritance of the earth? Or will I give them less than I was given?"¹ As a former student of Hearne High School, there is not a time that I can recall engaging with or being out in nature, and to that end, I aim to give my students more than what I was given. Biology professor Paul Turner mentioned how a sense of humbleness comes over him when he stares out into the vast ocean as he realizes that he is just one small cog in what makes up our world's biodiversity. Students of Hearne High, too, can come to that realization when they engage with this unit and intentionally pay attention to the world around them and become one with nature.

The emotional baggage that my students bring to school daily is tantamount to emotional torture. Who has time to appreciate the nature of their backyard when clear and present dangers force an abundance of time to be devoted to work? And not just schoolwork but work work. Most of my high school students have part-time paying jobs or odd jobs where compensation is given through tips. I asked them if they ever noticed the world around them and saw beauty in nature, and they did not. Kimberley L. Meidenbauer et al. postulate, "Brief walks in natural settings have been shown to increase positive affect and decrease negative affect compared to urban walks, and the effects have been found in healthy and clinical populations."² The article suggests a link between nature exposure and emotional well-being.

Upon reading that, I thought of incorporating that newfound information into my classroom with my students. How can I get students outside, but also, how can I get them to write about outside, nature, and their families? The way students and their families connect with nature is vital to this curriculum unit, as nature will be the tree from which the fruit of storytelling will be born.

Questions to be considered as I get students outside and in nature come from Rachel Carson and should be at the forefront of student's minds as they visit and revisit their sit-spots: 1. What if I had never seen this before? 2. What if I knew I would never see it again? Our seminar leader, Jill Campbell, said something that truly resonated with me and how much access my students have to technology: kids will not remember their best day on TikTok or YouTube. According to Rachel Carson, "For most of us, knowledge of our world comes largely through sight, yet we look about with such unseeing eyes that we are partially blind."³ Getting students outside and in nature will be the first step in curing their blindness to the world around them.

I chose this topic because while the choice to come to America may not have been given to all my students, where they come from matters, their heritage matters, their culture matters, they matter. When asked whether nature as a subject matter belongs to some people and not to others, that question struck a chord with me for my students. Is having time to notice nature and stop and metaphorically smell the roses a gift that only people of certain socioeconomic statuses have the privilege or luxury of having?

I hope that my curriculum unit will be used not only to enhance my students' writing but also to serve as a tenet of self-worth and intentionally embracing our heritages and cultures by going to shared public spaces in our metaphorical backyards to disrupt the notion of normal and squash any stereotypes associated with people of specific backgrounds. Invite students to embrace the nuances that may embarrass them, but make them who they are by using nature, painting, and storytelling elements to preserve their life stories forever.

Ballard and Ballard quote Goodall by saying, "The stories of those who came before us in our families provide a framework for understanding our identity through theirs."⁴ I agree wholeheartedly as I recall with wide-eyed amazement recounting the stories my grandmother told me, or how my children always wanted to hear the story of their birth on every birthday, as part of our traditions now. As a teacher, I imagine the narrative inheritance my students will get from their families, the inheritance of stories, experiences, and identities. Adding nature to that complexity of familial dynamics is the beginning of understanding one's family tree. This curriculum unit will provide that to my students and their families.

Rationale

As with anything worth doing, one must question why. Why is it worth instructing my students about nature? The answer to that question is multifaceted, and I only fully appreciated it in week two of the intensive session in Jill Campbell's seminar on writing about nature. There was beauty in actual nature and in the poems, short stories, and articles. As the steward of my profession, what compels and motivates me to write and teach this unit is the notion that I am bound as an educator to pass this newfound knowledge on to my students. I owe it to them to bring a more profound knowledge and understanding of nature, and how we choose to interact with it or not has lasting impacts on not only Hearne but the world. To not teach this unit would be a massive injustice that equals an educational felony in that I would be robbing my students of culturally responsive instructional practices that could give them a new appreciation for nature.

I want this unit to be a two-fold awakening for my students. With that awakening, I hope a sense of urgency will be born. There is an urgency to call on black and brown people who look like us, who do not fit the typical mold of those who usually engage in shared public spaces in nature, to break that mold and begin to do so. My goal is to awaken my students' cognitive dissonance with nature and the environmental injustices they face because they do not know what they do not know. The second call to action that this unit will provide is a sense of pride in oneself. As students interview their family members and listen to their peers' stories of how their ancestors and families interact with nature, they will become more inclined to have a sense of pride in where they are from and a sense of belonging with where they are going.

Paul Turner said that if we wanted to see nature in its splendor, we had better go soon as that beauty, unfortunately, will not always be here to marvel at. The idea that this curriculum unit could be used as a springboard to help foster and nurture a relationship with nature for my students gives me a sense of pride

and hope. I hope that this unit will produce future world travelers, artists, social or political activists, poets, and biochemists. The possibilities are endless. Rachel Carson says it best: "A child's world is fresh and new and beautiful, full of wonder and excitement. Exploring nature with [a] child is largely a matter of becoming receptive to what is around you."⁵

Mental health has not been mentioned at all in this unit. It is worth noting that there is research suggesting that being in nature supports more stable mental faculties. Teachers are not equipped to be the first line of support for our students' mental health. I do not endorse trying to triage that aspect of my students' overall well-being, as I lack the qualifications, degrees, and certifications to diagnose or treat. However, I notice and can tell when my students are not themselves. Chia-Chen Chang et al. stated, "While urbanization has advantages, urban living is, nonetheless, associated with poorer mental health, reduced subjective well-being, and a higher risk of psychiatric disorders. Reducing nature experiences in urban environments is a key risk factor for mental health issues and is associated with an increased risk of anxiety and depression."⁶ Nature orientation (the willingness and desire to experience nature) and nature opportunity (places with nature more readily available) are not independent of each other; I want this unit to promote both of those entities with my students.

Unit Overview

This unit's target grade level(s) will be for middle and high school students at the secondary level. What is beautiful about this curriculum unit is that while it is intended for older students, it can easily be adapted to fit the age and grade levels of kindergarten through sixth-grade students. The standards addressed target those whose first language is not English, although all students benefit from sheltered instructional practices regardless of whether they are already native English speakers. Students will be utilizing sit spots (virtual and real) to become familiar with nature and learn how to be more comfortable while doing so. Incorporating art and writing will enhance their familiarity with nature and broaden their knowledge of heritage as it relates to them personally. Having guest speakers share their experiences with nature will help learners become respectful of others' experiences as they formulate their own.

Background Environment

Hearne is in central Texas, a small community of approximately 4,000 people, known as the crossroads of Texas. There are three schools in Hearne and the district; Hearne Elementary, Hearne Junior High, and Hearne High. According to data from the US census bureau, a news article recently stated that Hispanics officially make up the most significant share of Texas's population as of 2022.

Because I began my teaching career with this district as a first-grade teacher and eventually went on to teach second, third, and fourth grades successively, most of my current junior high and high school students had or remember me from elementary school, as do their parents. Not only have I worked in the district for the past decade, but I graduated from there as well. My students' parents are classmates of mine or went to school

with me at some point. I plan to capitalize on that when having students and their parents share their stories orally to the class regarding their experiences with nature and what nature means to them. I teach, specifically, students whose first language is not English.

When questioned about nature and whether my students experience it, this curriculum unit will address their need for more experience in that area. Some stated they were too busy, and some were not interested in doing so. This unit will marry nature and storytelling to enhance student learning in the areas of writing, listening, and speaking. By bringing fine arts into this curriculum unit through painting, students can highlight before and after portraits of what nature means to them. While my students are proud of who they are and who they have become, some hold insecurities about their relatives and ancestry.

Content Objectives

The students participating in this curriculum unit will get the research I conducted independently and what has been gained from the seminar with Jill Campbell, "Writing About Nature." Learners will participate in writing assignments that include writing about nature juxtaposed with being in nature. Having their friends and family tell them stories about nature will lend itself to the unit in that while there are benefits to being in nature, literacy benefits come from storytelling. Hearne High School students' Texas English Language Proficiency Assessment System or TELPAS scores revealed that writing was the area that needed the most improvement across the domains of listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

This unit will assist in improving the scores for that domain and using storytelling about nature to foster a love of literacy, writing, and nature itself. Denise E. Agosto states, "Most of the writing about the literacy benefits of storytelling in professional literature has been based on practical observations rather than research findings."⁷ While some could argue about the validity of the findings, as classroom teachers, we know that the data we collect from informal observations can be a treasure trove of information to serve our students better. The article further contends that storytelling helps students become better listeners and readers while building their vocabulary. As a teacher who teaches English as a Second Language, the importance of those skills is hugely impactful to those acquiring the English language, the very students under my tutelage.

Yale Art Historian Tim Barringer gave a talk that detailed the painting *The Oxbow* and the back-story of the artist Thomas Cole. What stood out most to me was that Thomas Cole grew up across the street from a foundry that made coal for steam engines, yet he is famous for his paintings about nature. What resonated most with me was learning about Cole's past, which helped to explain his choices of how or what was painted. How Cole grew up helped shape his view of the world and what he emulated in his art. Most notably, no one knows why exactly he did what he did because he did not leave a journal explaining his thought process. There, the idea was formed for my students to paint two renditions of what nature means to them and have them use the art of storytelling to explain how their art progressed from one painting to the next.

Using their nature journals, virtual and actual sit-spots, familial interviews, and picture writings will inspire the change in their paintings from one to the other. In the book *Earth Keeper*, N. Scott Momaday writes of a story his father told him: "The night the old man Dragonfly came to my grandfather's house, the moon was full."⁸ Even though Momaday was not there, the detail his father put into telling him that story made him feel like he was. That poem is inspirational because when my students hear stories from their families, it will be as though

they were there in that time and place too. Those poems will serve as inspiration for what the expectations of their journal writings will focus upon—putting as much detail into their entries as possible so that the reader will feel frozen at that moment with them.

With nature journaling, one will ponder if it is being done correctly, and there is beauty in knowing that there is no right or wrong way necessarily, as poems follow a rule of their own entirely. Take, for instance, the poem *be careful* by Ed Roberson. The title does not have capital letters as in most titles in English and has unusual spacing in the lines of the one-stanza poem. The grammatical errors can be off-putting to English Language Arts teachers. However, the takeaway is that it is an element of control or that the poem is written to force the reader to engage in it in a certain way, as it disrupts the usual way of reading. This mode can be shown to students who still need to become proficient in English and encourage them to get their thoughts out of their heads and into their nature journals. Their journals will heavily impact the production of their artwork as they reflect upon what they wrote or illustrated from their sit-spots.

Nature journaling is one piece of the puzzle, but storytelling is another facet. Denise Agosto says, "Most of the writing about the literacy benefits of storytelling in the professional literature has been based on observations from practice rather than research findings. Authors of these pieces typically suggest that storytelling helps children to become better listeners and better readers while building vocabulary."⁹ As students interview their family members and listen to others' stories about their experiences with nature, they can be provided follow-up questions related to comprehension and reflection, including: How do you think they felt during this time? What do you think caused them to feel this way? Could you imagine yourself in their shoes? According to the article, those questions encourage critical thinking and ongoing cognitive engagement, skills students learning another language benefit significantly from.

Classroom Activities

Some of the classroom activities that will be done with this unit are utilized in the seminar with Jill Campbell.

Painting

Students will be given two canvases to produce what nature means to them. The first canvas will be given to them at the beginning of the unit with a straightforward direction. Paint what their idea or representation of nature means to them. The second canvas will be given to them at the end of the unit with the instruction to paint what their newfound sense of nature means after finishing the unit. I want to see how their ideas have changed and evolved into something more profound than what they initially began with.

Virtual Sit-Spot

Students will take a virtual field trip and interact with nature using free nature cameras. After 20 minutes of nature watching, students will write their thoughts and what they witnessed in their nature journals. Some days it will be at their discretion what they will write, and some days it will be teacher-led.

Actual Sit-Spot

Students will be taken to the park to sit and observe the natural world around them. Some days they will be

given a specific focus, and some days they will have some autonomy. Any time they are in their sit-spot, it will be technology free for the first 15-20 minutes. They will be bused to the local park once a week for 6 weeks (about 1 and a half months) and have 40 minutes to complete the assignment for the day. As they repeatedly visit the same place in nature, they will eventually develop a personal relationship with nature. They will notice the changes in the surroundings in various weather types and seasons. Sit spots are excellent for reading, nature journaling, nature sketching, or thinking.

Picture Writing

On days without virtual sit-spots or actual sit-spots, students will be given picture books and nature-inspired writing prompts to write about in their nature journals based on the illustrations within.

Storytelling

Students will interview their family members with guided questions about their experiences with nature and what nature means to them. Some interviewed will come to the school and share their stories with the class. I will share my nature story with my students and interview my momma about her nature experiences, who will then come to the school and tell my students about them. Students will take from their families and mine a different aspect of nature, which will help transform their first painting into something more meaningful than their second one. Students will use the art of storytelling to provide the back-story behind the transformation of their two paintings to bring their artwork to life.

Teaching Strategies

Teachers can utilize the teaching strategies listed and adapt them to fit the needs of their own students as needed.

Painting

While there is no specific technique or strategy that I will use, I will invest in medium-sized canvases to give two to each student for their before and after nature portraits. Acrylic paint and paintbrushes will also be provided to the students, courtesy of the art department. Students will have the autonomy to complete the first painting as they desire. As the curriculum unit progresses, so will their knowledge of nature; their second painting will have more depth and meaning. Students will draw inspiration from nature walks, sit spots, virtual field trips, and picture books.

Journaling

As this unit will focus on nature and being actively engaged with it, it is essential to remember that the goal is to record observations, perceptions, and personal feelings *regularly*. This process will heavily rely on consistency to build a reflective practice that will help form the second painting. Students can use their nature journals to assist with their learning and understanding of the natural world around them. According to Clare Walker Leslie and Charles E. Roth, "A nature journal forges the connection between the author and the pulses of life he or she witnesses in nature."¹⁰ The purpose of the students keeping a nature journal will be to have them focus on the environment. Students will journal when doing the virtual and actual sit-spots and again

when picture writing. They will be encouraged to illustrate their journal entries using many writing utensils.

Virtual and Actual Sit-Spot

For students whose experiences with nature may be limited, these sessions must be intentional, focused, and *slow*. This part of the process will be challenging. However, returning to the same daily or weekly habitat builds a slow sense of attention, which is the mental faculty of considering or taking notice, exceptional care, or consideration. Questions posed to students during these sit-spots could include: What do I notice? What question do I have? What makes me wonder? What did you observe? What is this telling or teaching you? According to Jon Young, "...personal growth would not have happened if he [a resistant student] had just charged into those woods daily in a different direction. It happened because he had one place where his rebellion and the intimidating natural world yielded to his newfound awareness, connections, and understanding."¹¹

It is also worth mentioning here how students will need to be told that paying attention is a form of reciprocity and will be needed to receive indeed the gift of seeing nature with open eyes and an open heart.

Picture Books about Nature

The resources listed here are books the teacher can use to provide pictures displaying nature with students. These books will be used in addition to the virtual and actual sit-spots.

Carter, Andy. *Margarito's Forest = El Bosque de Don Margarito*. Monee, IL: Hard Ball Press, 2016.

Margarito's Forest is a bilingual book that tells the nonfiction account of Don Margarito Esteban Álvarez Velázquez's life as told by his daughter, Doña Maria Guadalupe. The story is of Mayan culture and wisdom passed from generation to generation about the effects of climate change. Allison Havens's multimedia collages are shown in this book. Students will use the illustrations as part of their picture writing. When looking at the pictures in the book, students will use the illustrations to guide how their art will transform. The illustrations will also serve as geographical inspiration for where the book characters originate. I hope students will be inspired by their first country's geography and use it in their own artwork.

Dorros, Authur. *La Isla Continuacion de Abuela*. New York, NY: Puffin Books, 1999.

The book *La Isla Continuacion de Abuela* is a fictional book about a girl and her grandmother who take a whimsically magical journey high above the streets of New York. While the story is told in narrative form, primarily in English, some Spanish phrases are sprinkled throughout when Abuela (Grandmother) points out places to her granddaughter, Rosalba. The illustrations done by Elisa Kleven will be used as part of students' picture writing. Seeing the illustrations will serve as inspiration for how much detail to add to their artwork as the unit progresses.

Gonzalez, Xelena. *All Around Us*. Holland, OH: Dreamscape Media, LLC, 2018.

All Around Us is a realistic-fiction book depicting a girl and her grandfather reflecting on life, death, and renewal cycles. While the story's premise may be subdued, the author's direct approach softens the heavy

subject matter. While the book delves into the circles of life, the illustrator adds to those drawings that include circles of faded sketched lines and arced lights from picture to picture. The illustrations done by Adriana M. Garcia will be used as part of the students' picture writing.

Winter, Jeanette. *Our House is on Fire: Greta Thunberg's Call to Save the Planet*. New York, NY: Beach Lane Books, 2019.

The story, *Our House is on Fire: Greta Thunberg's Call to Save the Planet*, is a biography about Greta Thunberg, who became a climate activist. She sparked a worldwide movement and demanded action from world leaders who refused to address the issue. Jeanette Winter is both the author and the illustrator, and those illustrations will aid in students' picture writing activities.

Winter, Jeanette. *Wangari's Trees of Peace a True Story from Africa*. New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018.

The story *Wangari's Trees of Peace, a True Story from Africa* is a biography about Wangari Maathai, who, as a young girl, grew up in Kenya surrounded by trees. She is allowed to attend college in the United States and, upon arriving back in Kenya, notices that forests are being destroyed and decides to plant seedlings. As they grow, so do her ambitions which eventually spark change and earn her a Nobel Peace Prize. Jeanette Winter is the author and illustrator of this book, which will be used with students as part of their picture writing.

Appendix: Implementing District Standards

Because all my students are those whose first language is not English, I will address some of the English Language Proficiency Standards or ELPS throughout this unit to meet district and state standards.

The kind of Hearne I want has many public, shared green spaces for my students to interact and be a part of nature, as it is their inherent right to pursue happiness. Tim Barringer said two words that resonated with me in his seminar talk; elitist and pretentious, and remarked on how the rich are doing well, and the poor are doing horribly. I owe it to my students to teach them that enjoying nature is a right everyone can and should enjoy and benefit from, no matter their social standing.

This curriculum unit with my emergent bilingual students will encompass all areas of the ELPS and provide instruction in listening, speaking, reading, and writing while diving into the shallow end of fine arts with beginner painting. When students listen to guest speakers, I will have them write about what resonated with them, encompassing two skills in one activity, listening and writing. As students discuss their artwork with the class, their speaking skills will be enhanced as they will have to speak in complete sentences. Students will peer review their work, which touches on the skill of reading. In Texas, they must score advanced high to exit the English as a second language course. This curriculum unit will hit all domains of TELPAS, getting them closer to reaching that goal.

In the Texas Administrative Code, Chapter 74.4, the ELPS applies to all grade and subject levels. They are designed to outline language proficiency levels and student expectations for English Language Learners (ELLs).¹²

(B) In fulfilling the requirements of this section, school districts shall:

(1) identify the student's English language proficiency levels in the domains of listening, speaking, reading, and writing in accordance with the proficiency level descriptors for the beginning, intermediate, advanced, and advanced high levels delineated in subsection

(2) provide instruction in the knowledge and skills of the foundation and enrichment curriculum in a manner that is linguistically accommodated (communicated, sequenced, and scaffolded) commensurate with the student's levels of English language proficiency to ensure that the student learns the knowledge and skills in the required curriculum;

(3) provide content-based instruction, including the cross-curricular second language acquisition essential knowledge and skills in subsection

These ELLs require focused, targeted, and systematic second language acquisition instruction to provide them with the foundation of English language vocabulary, grammar, syntax, and English mechanics necessary to support content-based instruction and accelerated learning of English.¹³

(1) Cross-curricular second language acquisition/learning strategies. The ELL uses language learning strategies to develop an awareness of his or her own learning processes in all content areas. In order for the ELL to meet grade-level learning expectations across the foundation and enrichment curriculum, all instruction delivered in English must be linguistically accommodated (communicated, sequenced, and scaffolded) commensurate with the student's level of English language proficiency.¹⁴

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