



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative  
2010 Volume III: Creating Lives: An Introduction to Biography

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## **Voices of France: Understanding the Power of Individual Voice through Biography**

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### **Introduction and Rationale**

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The scene is one of glorious, golden splendor. We are in 1653 and the handsome young Louis XIV is dancing the role of Apollo accompanied by music and a spoken eulogy making it clear that he is a masterpiece sent by God as a gift to France. He is fourteen years of age, just before his consecration as the King of France. The regency of his mother over France is at an end and the dauphin of France is clearly demonstrating that he is now the King of France. The careful choreography of the piece is a strong visual representation of his power and of the glittering, golden era over which he is to reign. This is a scene from the movie *Le Roi danse* directed by Gérard Corbiau. <sup>1</sup> This is a biographical movie, a biopic, about the life of Louis's Italian court musician and choreographer, Lully. This is a pivotal moment, the moment where Louis is about to have power invested in him and through him. Here, through the power of image, dance and music, he finds his own voice, his own expression of that power. It is also a moment that tells us about this particular time in the history of France through a biographical portrayal of Louis XIV, about the importance of pivotal moments in an individual's life and about the power of an image.

Eleventh and twelfth grade students are poised at the brink of an important moment in their lives: graduation from high school. This is a time of intense relief and celebration, an important event eagerly anticipated by high school students. Schools attempt to preserve the gravity of the occasion amidst the general hollering and jubilation through the rite of the graduation ceremony - the portentous speeches, the elevating music, the ceremonial walk across the stage and reading of each graduate's name. And thus this ceremony takes its place among the rites of passage of each student's life. It is choreographed to perfection and duly documented with photographs, autographs and articles in the local newspaper. The event takes its place in the chronicle of students' lives, a date never to be forgotten, a date that marks each student's passage through time. Most students are aware, albeit perhaps just for a moment, that they are in the process of creating the story of their own lives.

At another student milestone - the 2010 commencement ceremony at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill - John Grisham stressed a simple message to the graduating students when he said: "To be heard, you must find a voice. For your ideas to be accepted, for your arguments to be believed, for your work to be admired, you must find a voice. (...) In life, finding a voice is speaking and living the truth." <sup>2</sup> The concept of

voice and the idea of the power of a clear, individual voice is something that is notoriously difficult for students to understand and develop. Grisham specified that this voice should have three characteristics: clarity, authenticity and veracity. This requires knowledge of self, one's individual strengths and weaknesses and a vision of where one wants to fit in the world and the contribution that one wants and is able to bring.

So why does this have anything to do with French class? One of the purposes of education is for students to build a body of knowledge to prepare them for the demands of adult life. They study math and English, science, geography and foreign language and pass from class to class often with a woeful lack of understanding of how they all relate. Increasingly, teachers are asked to bring interdisciplinary components to their teaching so that different subject areas are reinforced and acquire a meaningful context. In short, the body of knowledge imparted should be cohesive rather than fragmented. French (or another foreign language) is an especially good opportunity for this kind of holistic learning. The study of French is, after all, not only a study of a language, but of peoples who express themselves in that language, of their societies, of their countries and their histories. Through a holistic sense of French, students come to a holistic sense of themselves.

I propose, with this unit, to study the lives of five individuals whose voices have had a strong impact on France, and on the world. Students will be introduced to the genre of biography, focusing in particular on the idea that some moments of a life are pivotal moments that have profound repercussions on the rest of their lives. They will see short movie representations of these moments to bring visual impact and immediacy to the idea. The movie excerpts will stress the subjects' youth and childhood. Students will then read excerpts from a biography written in the form of a graphic novel. This will be in French. Students will work in groups to consider how particular moments of an individual's youth and childhood can influence the "voice" that he subsequently developed in life. In groups, they will create a graphic novel presentation of important and formative moments of their subject's life. Lastly, students will reflect on their own experiences and think about important moments in their own lives, their own nascent "voices." Through viewing themselves as biographical subjects in French, a foreign language, they will see "voice" as something that they must create and choreograph, rather than something innate.

I teach levels of French ranging from French I up to French V AP in an urban high school. This particular unit of study is written for my French IV class. There were several reasons for focusing on this level. Levels One through Three in French have many time constraints on them due to the body of new grammar and vocabulary which must be imparted to establish sound bases for future French study. These levels are also very structured by the demands of high school textbooks that also contain cultural components. In our particular French textbook series <sup>3</sup> the Level III textbook has a cultural focus on French history, giving students a background knowledge that will prepare them well for looking at history from the perspective of biography. Level IV is an honors course that is often taken by high school juniors and seniors who will be able to think about the importance of their own lives and those of others with a degree of maturity. This is also a level where I often feel that students can easily lose interest. They are often studying Advanced Placement courses in other subjects during this year and sometimes their other classes can seem less important. Initial enthusiasm for French may die down unless there are interesting new challenges which allow students to feel that they have progressed in the language to new levels. They must feel the connection of French to their own lives. A feeling of expertise is a heady incitement to continue learning a language and helps students to gain confidence in their own ability to function in another language and understand another culture.

Foreign language teachers also face the challenge of answering the students' assumption – tacit or overt – that English is understood everywhere in the world and that Anglophone culture is dominant. Why learn a

foreign language or anything about foreign countries and peoples? Studying these five lives will contribute to students' awareness of the existence of a larger world "out there," containing different societies and cultures. We will study individuals during their youth and adolescent years and look for early influences and important moments that have a part in the formation of the adults they will become. This study is designed to help students to relate to the contributions and achievements of individuals who have a place in the history of France and of the world and to do so in an interesting way that highlights the links of the study of French to other areas of the curriculum.

The unit is designed to be taught over a semester. It will start after an initial introduction to the course and a review and will run from mid first quarter to the end of second quarter. This unit involves some group work and students will also be required to put in some preparation outside the classroom. It is will be taught concurrently with other aspects of the curriculum so that instruction is varied and students have time to think about biography and the individual they are studying.

## Strategies

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### Pivotal Moments

At the beginning of the unit, students will see various scenes where characters are at pivotal points including one scene from Gérard Corbiau's movie *Le Roi danse*. An excerpt from the autobiographical animated movie *Persepolis* will be shown. <sup>4</sup> Here students will see the young Marji seeing the unfolding events in Iran – the arrest of her uncle by the Shah and then his subsequent execution by the revolutionaries. The danger of life in Iran subsequently causes Marji to be sent to study in Vienna and face isolation and the difficulties of growing up as a Western adolescent. The events we will see in her childhood in Iran and youth in France will become an integral part of her later life as an acclaimed author. Pivotal moments in her childhood included the execution of her uncle, her departure for Vienna and her discovery on her arrival that she has nowhere to live. Marji experiments with how to live as a Western teenager – trying on identities in an attempt to find her place in a new culture. We have a clear sense of Marji trying to make sense of an absurd world.

This introduction is designed to stimulate student interest in life stories and introduce the idea that individuals are, in effect, "writing" their own lives even in their youth – whether they are aware of it at the time or not. The decisions that they take are determining the course of their lives and the stamp they will put on the world.

An appreciation of the power of images is important at this stage, as in this unit students will be charged with transposing the events from the childhoods of important French historical figures from text into a graphic biography format. In doing so, students will be reading the interpretation offered by a biographer of these lives and then becoming biographers themselves as they cast the events of these young lives and interpret how the youth of these historical figures has relevance to the achievements of their adult lives. Students will need to have an understanding of biography and graphic novels as genres in order to complete the tasks assigned and to be able to look at their own lives and those of classmates as biographies that may one day be written.

## Biography

The unit will encourage students to read biographies and to create graphic biographies of the childhood of five important figures from French history.

Hermione Lee provides us with a definition of biography calling it: "the story of a person told by someone else." <sup>5</sup> She explains that the word "story" is more appropriate than "account" because a biography is written as a narrative rather than a succession of bald facts. The story is told, and not necessarily written. The immensely popular Biography Channel on American television is ample proof of this. In recent years, the Internet has become a rich new source of ways to document and comment on our lives and those of others – sometimes in "real time" as events are actually unfolding.

Of course, we all think we can recognize a biography on the shelf of our local bookshop or library. Actually, we cannot be sure what to expect when we pick out a biography and start reading it. Written biography reflects the life and times of the biographer as much as the subject as the former presents his materials according to the tenets in place at the time of writing. If we follow the development of modern biography from its beginnings, we are rapidly convinced of the truth of Lee's statement that biography is "a mixed, unstable genre, whose rules keep coming undone." <sup>6</sup> Writing in the 1700s, Samuel Johnson thought that the value of biography was to record and understand other individuals, assess their moral character, and to draw lessons from their lives. Understanding an individual involved knowing about his private life rather than contenting oneself with his public face. <sup>7</sup> Under the Victorians, however, biographies presented lives lead in the public domain. Due to the social and moral constraints of the time, any discussion of private life was undertaken nervously. The biographer's intent was often to praise the subject of the biography – usually important men in public life – and many biographies "exuded panegyric." <sup>8</sup> This all changed in the early twentieth century, when readers once again were told intimate details about the biographical subjects' private lives. Biographies of "ordinary" people were written reflecting the increase in interest in the rights of the individual in democratic Western society. The rapid development of technology has allowed experimentation with form and "opened the gates of biography to the kind of psychological and sociological interpretations that characterizes almost all biography today." <sup>9</sup> Biography is such a popular form today that Hermione Lee says with justification that: "the telling of life stories is the dominant narrative mode of our times." <sup>10</sup>

The popularity of biography suggests that a unit using stories of lives – biographies – has the potential to interest students. Vast formal tomes giving reams of historical detail are clearly not the kind of stories that will inspire students to learn about France. I had to settle on clear criteria for the choice of my five biographies. First, the youthful years of the subjects had to be described in an interesting and vivid fashion so that students could be drawn in by the text rather than repelled. Second, the subjects of these biographies had to be people whose lives were sufficiently important to fulfill the demands of my course of instruction. These individuals had to have relevance and importance in the historical and cultural life of France. Third, I wanted to make sure that there were biographies of both men and women. Fourth, these were to be people from history to build on students' prior knowledge of French history. I determined that the first half of the twentieth century would be my cut-off point. The big question that remained was whether these biographies should be in French or in English.

After extensive reading of biographies of people I considered important and potentially interesting for the students, I rapidly realized that biography has many different kinds of narrative, some of which are completely unsuitable for the purposes of this unit. Many – although relatively modern – are historical biographies where

the form of the narrative is a "steady and unsurprising, solid scaffolding for the blocks of facts" <sup>11</sup> . These are too long and slow moving for my students. Alice Kessler-Harris talks of biography as being a hybrid of "history crossed with narrative" and sees biographies ranging between the two poles of "documentary biography" and "aesthetic biography". <sup>12</sup> Hermione Lee uses two useful metaphors to make a similar distinction. Most biographies I had read were towards the documentary pole on Kessler-Harris's continuum and perhaps contained more aspects of Lee's first metaphor: biography as an autopsy. <sup>13</sup> This idea highlights the investigation and subsequent description and attempt to understand the "obscure, strange or inexplicable" in a life. My biographies needed to possess more characteristics of the second metaphor she uses: biography as a portrait. Although this is also an investigation of the subject, here we think of capturing the subject on the page, capturing their likeness and their personality. Like the subjects of painted portraits, biographical subjects "should seem to be alive, breathing, present in all the totality, there-ness, and authenticity of their being." <sup>14</sup> Philip Ziegler seems to concur with this when he talks in a about the need in biography for "immediacy" and "revelation" and adds: "To be a biographer of any merit requires the skills of the historian, the psychologist and the gossip columnist." <sup>15</sup>

The biographies selected for this unit concern the lives of Joan of Arc, Louis XIV, Rousseau, Balzac and Marie Curie. Joan of Arc lived in the 1400s and helped change the course of the Hundred Years War by leading the French army to decisive victory over the English. Louis XIV reigned from 1651 until his death in 1715 and had a profound effect on the cultural and political life of France. Rousseau (1712 - 1778) is one of the most influential writers of his time and profoundly influenced the American Founding Fathers and the French revolutionaries with his writings. Balzac is a great European writer, considered to be the founder of the modern novel. Marie Curie (1867 - 1934) received two Nobel prizes for her work in science and was the first woman scientist to become world-famous. Two women and three men, a saint, a king, a philosopher/writer, an author, a scientist: these are lives spanning six centuries and showing different kinds of voices in the grand march of history. All have interesting childhoods with much to offer this study.

A further thorny question facing me was that of the choice of language for the biographies. Initially, I wanted to use biographies in French. This is, after all, a French class. I came to the conclusion, however, that students would read the biographical portion of my unit in English. This allowed me to choose biographies that are modern and popular with today's reading public, yet accurate and serious in their intent. In this way, students will "see" the individual in the portrait without the multiple metaphorical layers of heavy paint and varnish placed between them and the subject by language difficulties.

This still left the problem of length. Coming back to the basic idea of voice - how the voice of an individual can influence society and history - the idea of concentrating on the childhood and youth of the subjects concerned seemed attractive. This idea closely parallels my intention to have the students reflect on their own voices in the world more closely. Would an excerpt about the subjects' childhoods suffice, or would the students need to read more in order to understand the biography and discuss the subject?

Students need an entry point into the biographical excerpt they will be reading. Beginnings are, of course, important in order to "catch the reader's interest", but are also important as they "set up the biographer's tone." <sup>16</sup> A biographer is inevitably interpreting the facts of a life and subsequently "weaving" facts elegantly into persuasive arguments. <sup>17</sup> It follows, therefore, that "Any biographical narrative is an artificial construct, since it inevitably involves selection and shaping." <sup>18</sup> A reader of a biography needs to understand the biographer's relationship to his or her subject, the "lens" through which the life will be presented. For this reason, my students also need to read the introduction so that they are aware of the objective of the

biographer. The biographer's "tone" is an important through-line organizing the text as well as the order of the events described.

Here we have reached an obvious stumbling block: if students read about the childhood of the subject, how then will they know anything about the subsequent actions of the personages which had made them influential historical figures?

I had already considered the idea of creating a timeline in the class to present important events in French history. This is an important background to place the individual biographical subjects in the context of French history. The timeline is an important visual aid, a graphic organizer, to anchor our study. Gary Fertig writes that timelines "raise awareness of the historical context and chronology contained in a single biography."<sup>19</sup> Why not have students read brief biographies online, in French, and create timelines (in French) illustrating their subjects' major achievements and place these alongside the "master" timeline? In this way, the students understand context and chronology while simultaneously reading in French about the life and thereby acquiring valuable vocabulary necessary to talk about their subjects. This leaves us free to read about the subjects' childhood and adolescence in English yet still prepare students for the last part of the unit – the creation of a graphic representation of the childhood (in French).

Students will read the biographical excerpts in groups of four. Their task will be to select scenes from these young lives showing moments deemed pivotal to the subject acquiring a voice, taking the course that will bring them fame in later life. Students will use a simple organizer to note the scenes and the private and wider context in which they occur. Gary Fertig notes that young people often tend to view history as a series of fixed and inevitable events and that individuals have little influence over them.<sup>20</sup> By using an organizer, the individual's part in developing his voice will become more apparent. The organizer will be important as the students decide which scenes they will portray in their condensed graphic biography of the subject's youth. It will also be important to guide the students in developing their tone and the through-line of the biography – their slant on the life and the structure that holds the scenes together. The discussion will take place in French, with dictionaries and the French timelines as resources.

## Graphic Novels

I decided to have students take a biography from a purely narrative medium into a graphic rendition after I read the first part of Stéphane Heuet's graphic novel representation of Proust's classic work *à la Recherche du temps perdu* (*Remembrance of Things Past*). The quality of the graphic art adds a new dimension to the text – the costumes and the décor make Proust's world accessible to us and are aesthetically pleasing. The famous moment where Marcel tastes a madeleine and is transported back in time to Combray and his Aunt Léonie is portrayed graphically by a swathe of steam from the cup of tea which we understand as mixing with the taste of the madeleine. This wafts from one image to the next pulling us along with his memories. A box of text straddles three images linking them – Aunt Léonie in her bed, the street near the house with himself as a young boy playing with a hoop, and a large image of the whole of Combray and the countryside surrounding it. The power of the images to collaborate with the text to convey meaning in an evocative way is a convincing example of the power of this genre. For my students, producing a graphic rendition of their biography would also offer another way to convey meaning – pictures merging with their developing command of French to produce meaning.

It is important for students to read a graphic novel before reading the biographies and think about the way text and image are used so that they, in their turn, can exploit what they have learned in their own texts. This

gives another layer of creativity to the groups' own graphic novels. The graphic novel we will read in French is *L'Ascension du Haut Mal* by David B. This is a biography of the author's brother who suffers from epilepsy. The drawings are in black and white and the French text is relatively simple to read. We are made aware that this is a biography by a preface written by the author's sister, in which she praises him for his faithful reconstruction of their childhood.

Volume One starts with the two brothers meeting in the bathroom as adults and Pierre-François is almost unable to recognize his older brother. The latter's appearance is ravaged by the effects of his epilepsy and by various different treatments. He has lost all of his front teeth and his brother has never seen him without his false teeth – his "artifices du jour." <sup>21</sup> The narrative then takes us back thirty years earlier to 1964 and the unfolding story of Jean-Christophe's disease.

There are many examples here of the power of image to weave a story with the text. The young Pierre-François has a vivid imagination and the reader is drawn into his world of cyclones in his bedroom at night and gigantic, threatening supervisors. The events distorted by his childhood imagination are no less bizarre than the events that are about to overtake his brother. The latter has an epileptic seizure at age 11, and Pierre-François feels that his brother has been carried off by a typhoon. The children's parents are art teachers, and Pierre-François' terrors as a child (monsters, typhoons and devils) and subsequently his more mature fear of people, life, the future, as well as both brothers' boyhood fascination with war, are the artistic lens through which we see the development of the disease and important events of the twentieth century. Pierre-François draws and writes a book and then continues drawing battle scenes. He explains that this is his form of epilepsy and that he is venting the anger that is inside him. <sup>22</sup> His brother expresses his anger through an obsession with Hitler.

The brothers' relationship changes. Jean-Christophe's disease changes him to the point where Pierre-François says that he no longer has an older brother. Jean-Christophe is now seen by other children as a threat. He has become the "other" to replace a previous fear they all had previously of an Algerian worker. One bigotry has replaced another. Pierre-François progressively becomes the "older" brother – responsible for Jean-Christophe when he has seizures. He realizes the dangers of his power when it becomes clear that he can actually provoke his brother's seizures when he feels like it. With this development, Pierre-François' imagination now peoples itself with the world of the fantastic, with the future, with history and with religion and he draws battles of ghosts, robots and devils.

New attempts to treat his brother unfold against the background of the social upheaval of 1968. Medical practitioners parade before us, as terrifying as the ghosts and devils of Pierre-François' imagination. We see a practitioner of Anti- psychiatry, followed by a sinister neurosurgeon anxious to make his name – despite the risk of paralyzing Jean-Christophe. There is a Japanese practitioner of macrobiotic Zen who reminds Pierre-François of a fat cat (and he is drawn as one here). This is followed by a macrobiotic diet that solves one of Pierre-François' problems – a dislike of many meats and sausages. He does not find internal peace, but remarks that he makes peace with his plate. <sup>23</sup> He announces triumphantly at the end of volume one that Jean-Christophe is cured, but we are aware that this is not the case as we have already been introduced to the adult Jean-Christophe at the beginning of the volume and that he has problems both by the text and the drawings.

Throughout the graphic biography, pivotal moments in both boys' lives are portrayed as their relationship changes. Pierre-François writes a book that is subsequently destroyed by his brother. A psychologist defiles one of his drawings by circling all the violent elements. The young Pierre-François is finding his voice as a

graphic artist through his drawings at the same time as Jean-Christophe is losing his voice (and threatening his brother's development) as the disease takes over. This is a powerful graphic biography, with black and white images of a claustrophobic, nightmarish quality that bring an added dimension to the text commentary (interior monologue of Pierre-François) and conversational direct speech. It literalizes and dramatizes the fact that biography is not only about the subject, but also involves the biographer and the reader. Here, the biographer's life is linked to that of his subject and students will link their lives to their own biographical subjects.

This graphic novel is a work of substance with a place in a course of study. Just as biography has struggled for acceptance as a legitimate scholarly medium, graphic novels were long considered a form of entertainment and lacking in critical legitimacy. Graphic novels are increasingly popular among young adults and are increasingly to be found in school libraries. The genre is considered to have begun in 1978 when the term "graphic novel" was applied to "a complex story told in a comic book format in 64 to 179 pages." <sup>24</sup> Some graphic novelists have taken classic texts – for example, Proust's "Remembrance of Things Past" – and put them into graphic form. This has also helped them to acquire legitimacy.

Biography can be considered a hybrid – it is history crossed with personal narrative <sup>25</sup> – and graphic novels can be seen to be a hybrid of image and text. T. Simmons makes an important distinction between the picture book and the graphic novel stating: "graphic novels rely on the fusion of visual components and verbal text to communication" whereas picture books "combine images with words." <sup>26</sup> So, illustrations in the case of the graphic novel do not merely reiterate or illustrate the content of the text, but also bring something new to the reader's understanding. Just as the personalizing lens of a biography of an individual can encourage a reader to relate to history, images can engage readers and encourage them to relate to text. This can help students who struggle with reading or those who are de-motivated by text.

So far I have talked about graphic novels – rather than graphic memoirs or biographies. How can we justify using a graphic format for a representation of biography and history? According to Ariela Freedman, the publication of Art Spiegelman's graphic novel *Maus* in 1973 meant that graphic memoirs could "lay claim to the territory of autobiography and history and could achieve critical legitimacy as well as broadened readership." <sup>27</sup> Like *L'Ascension du Haut Mal*, *Maus* is both autobiography and biography as Spiegelman tells the story of his own life and that of his father. Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*, published in 2000, is another "autobiographical novel" in graphic novel form that has achieved huge popularity and has been produced as a movie. The movie animates the same style of drawings as the novel and has also been very well received. The title of an article written by Manuela Costantina refers to the effect of the protagonist "Marji" from Satrapi's autobiographical novel: "Marji: Popular Commix Heroine Breathing Life into the Writing of History." The post-modern playing with different forms of narration and blurring of distinctions between genres has caused a problem with nomenclature. How can you call an autobiography – based on facts, telling the story of a life – a "graphic novel"? Freedman quotes the artist Lydia Davis as coining the term "autofictionalography" for this autobiographical form. Perhaps then, there is room for the term "biofictionalography" to describe a biography in graphic form.

There have, in fact, been a number of graphic biographies written at this point. Rick Geary has written a biography of J. Edgar Hoover in graphic form and Andrew Helfer has written about Ronald Reagan and Malcolm X. These are many other examples, involving figures such as George Washington and Trotsky.

The fact that this genre has been flourishing corroborates Bucher and Manning's statement that "many young adults enjoy graphic novels because the genre differs so dramatically from the books that educators

traditionally have encouraged adolescents to read." <sup>28</sup> Stephen E. Tabachnick observes that English literature is in transition and expresses the opinion that the numerous works of fiction, autobiography and biography which are being written in graphic are an "attempt of the physical book to survive in an electronic age by combining the advantages of the traditional reading experience with those of the computer screen, which often provides visual objects alongside text." <sup>29</sup> Librarians are increasingly weighing in to assure that graphic novels and graphic non-fiction are in school libraries, and there are cases being made for graphic novels being used with adolescents to address the standards of such august organizations as the National Council of Social Studies. <sup>30</sup> The Savannah College of Art and Design offers a course in sequential art – a further proof that graphic art is gaining acceptance in academic circles in the wake of the substantial works that have been recently published.

## **Presentations**

Students will be required to present their work to the class. They will first present their subject's life using the events on the timeline they have created. All students will participate in this presentation in French. One of the purposes of presenting the information to the class is that students will have to explain their timelines. Robert Marzano identifies a number of steps to improve learning from organizers. Most processing done in the classroom is linguistic (semantic), and nonlinguistic forms of processing are often neglected. Studies show that the use of nonlinguistic forms increase students' retention of information. <sup>31</sup> Marzano stresses the importance for students to explain their non-linguistic representations, thereby forcing them to have a clear grasp of the information and deepening their own understanding.

After the students have described the life, they will present their "biofictionalography" to the class. The work will be scanned page by page and presented using a projector. Students will read the roles of the different characters in their text, as well as any narrative accompanying pictures. They will have divided up the roles while planning the presentation in their groups. The members of the class will be given a copy of the timeline and be required to assess the presentation of their peers according to various criteria: clarity of the presentation; quality of the drawings; quality of the text; pronunciation; interest and energy of the presentation. The presentations will take place on different days so that students are not saturated with information on one day and can remain interested.

## **Biocubes or "Autofictionalcubes"**

The last part of the project is a reflective portion. Students will fill in information on a format that will subsequently be folded into a cube. They will reflect on themselves and the life they may have as adults. On the six sides they will be asked to fill out information as if they were explaining the importance of their adult lives to a French audience. They will be asked to put their name, their birth date and the place that they are living in their projected future on the first side. On the other faces of the cube, they will talk about their childhood and adolescence, describe their adult personality, describe a defining moment in their lives, describe their projected achievements and lastly give an original quotation to sum up their view of life. The lives they project must seem logical in terms of their personality. These "lives" will be shared within new groups of four or five students. The group will vote for the "life of achievement" which is most convincingly portrayed. The winners from each group will present their "lives" to the class as a whole.

With this final activity, students will think about their lives and the "voice" that they have and will have in the future. It will be important to emphasize that lives and voices change over time, and that there are things that we do not control in our destiny. We must, however, think about whom we are and seek to have a voice and

that adversity sometimes can have a positive effect on our determination to achieve rather than crushing us.

## Activities

This unit has a logical sequence of activities that take students through learning about biography and the graphic novel to thinking about history and pivotal moments in famous peoples' lives. The final step is for students to reflect on their own lives. The unit requires group work and it is suggested that the teacher should administer a questionnaire prior to the first activity of the unit. This can be part of the information sheet most teachers issue at the beginning of the year to find out pertinent information about their students. There should be a short section where each student is asked to assess themselves on a scale 1-10 in the following areas:

- Level of comfort speaking French;
- Level of interest in French history;
- Accuracy of written French;
- Ability to work independently;
- Leadership ability.

The following questions may be answered by filling in a blank with the information:

- Final grade for last class taken in French;
- Final grade for last class taken in history and level of class;
- Final grade for last class taken in English and level of class.

Teachers may wish to add their own questions and could also consult with colleagues in different areas of the curriculum in order to form an accurate opinion of students' strengths and abilities. This will enable teachers to form well-balanced groups of students with complementary abilities.

### Activity 1

In order to reactivate prior knowledge of French history and to add new details to what students already know, the first activity of this unit will be a swift and comprehensive review of French history. This will also be an opportunity for students to start working on oral French and to form an "esprit de corps" within their group.

The teacher divides the class into groups of 4-5 students. Groups should be chosen, where possible, to include at least one student who enjoys art projects, one who likes history, one who is happy to speak French and one who has a good level of accuracy in written French. The teacher may have a good idea of students' respective strengths from prior classes with them or may use a questionnaire similar to that described above to form well-balanced groups.

The first activity will be to form a long timeline along a hallway or wall of a classroom. Dimensions will vary according to the space available. The timeline could cover history from 0 to 2010 or 1000 to 2010, depending on how much prior knowledge the students have and how much time is at the teachers disposal.

Each group will be assigned a period of history. Students will then be asked to research important events during this time period. Prior to this, there should be a general class discussion about how to determine which events are important. Each group will decide on the events that individual students will describe, choosing from the period assigned to the group. Each student will write a paragraph in French describing their designated event and find an interesting, representative illustration of the event. Each student will submit his

work for grading to the teacher. After grading and rewriting clearing up any errors, each student will make photocopies for everyone in the class and submit one copy in a plastic document folder to be placed near the timeline and a line from the timeline to the event will establish when this took place in history. In this way, the whole class – and indeed anyone who sees the timeline – will acquire an accurate visual representation of the event's place in history. Students in the class will all compile a history dossier comprising each student's illustration and description. The dossier will be part of the final grade for the unit. This will encourage students to be organized and also to listen to the presentations. The presentations will take place on successive days – one day per group – so that it is an engaging part of class and so that teachers may continue to address other aspects of the curriculum throughout.

I will be using a book on French history illustrated and written in simple French, but students could also consult websites on the Internet. I also give some suggestions in the student resources.

This part of the unit may be followed by a quiz, as students will all have paragraphs written by their peers to study from. The quiz must be based on the historical events that students have chosen to highlight and will therefore necessarily vary from class to class. The emphasis should be on the importance to French history rather than testing whether students have memorized the exact dates of each event.

## **Activity 2**

This is where students will be introduced to the main focus of the unit: pivotal points in important individuals' young lives, how these subsequently affect their adult lives and the cultural, scientific and historical life of France.

After introducing these ideas, the teacher will show excerpts chosen from movies. I intend to show the scene from *Le Roi danse* discussed in the introduction to the unit. Here, Louis XIV at the tender age of fourteen expresses the power invested in him and the powerful use that he will make of it in his reign through dance. This is, therefore, a pivotal moment where the young king leaves his youth behind and takes on the mantle of authority. Students will see the power of image to express such moments succinctly and with great immediacy.

The other scene will be from a different world: twentieth-century Austria. A young Iranian girl – who will subsequently become a well-known author – searches for her European identity. I will show students the graphic novel *Persepolis* and explain that this is an autobiography and that the movie is an animated representation of the novel. Students will be asked to look at the selected scene in the movie and study how the images and the text work together. We will then discuss the pivotal moments portrayed and their importance in the author's life and the adult she became. We will discuss the power of image to portray moments of a life.

## **Activity 3**

I will introduce the genre of biography, the genre of the graphic novel, and explain the objectives of the unit: to read part of a biography of an important individual in French history – namely, their youth – and then, in groups, decide on pivotal moments in order to subsequently create a graphic biography.

The introduction will be a PowerPoint presentation. We will discuss two metaphors for biography: an autopsy and a portrait.<sup>32</sup> I will show pictures of both and encourage students to think about the limitations of these metaphors. I will elicit from the students that autopsies are forensic and therefore lifeless and cannot portray

emotions and beliefs – the "vital spark" of the subject. I will then continue questioning the students (in French) until they come to the conclusion that a portrait can be idealized or distorted in some way according to the artist's perspective. I will give examples of portraits where this is the case. I will point out that portraits capture a moment in time, whereas biography follows a subject as it changes and develops through life.

The presentation will continue with some rules for the students' biographies.<sup>33</sup> The students will be required to:

- have a responsibility to the truth and not base their biographies on pure invention;
- select facts and shape the material;
- have a stance towards the subject but retain a measure of objectivity;
- place the subject in his historical and cultural context because individuals do not exist in isolation;
- think about the identity of the subject – who he is and how he matures and develops;
- tread a careful path between giving a story which is of value to a reader and one that is gossipy and sensationalized;
- be aware that no biography – including theirs - has the last word on the subject.

#### **Activity 4**

The class will read the first volume of David B.'s graphic biography *L'Ascension du Haut Mal* (*Epilepsy* is the title in English.) This will be read in French. There will be class discussion about the pivotal moments in the text and the use of text and image. Students will fill out a three-column organizer:

- Column 1: pivotal events of Jean-Christophe's life
- Column 2: family situation at the time (personal cadre – including where they are living, what is happening to the family);
- Column 3: situation in France (political, social events of note.)

This organizer will be handed in for grading.

David B.'s periodic portrayal of individuals as animals will be discussed, as will the graphic novels *Maus* and *Persepolis*. Students will be encouraged to think about how to portray events simply, and how use of animal images can contribute to the power of the text. Students will also see the graphic rendition of Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* with its detailed drawings and portrayal of the époque (dress, houses, etc.)

#### **Activity 5**

Groups will decide which biography of the five most interests them. If students are unable to decide or there are other problems, the teacher will assign the readings. The readings will be excerpts from biographies of individuals. They will include the biographer's introduction revealing his "slant" and pages narrating the childhood and youth of the subject. Excerpts will be as follows:

1. *The Virgin Warrior*: pages 1-37
2. I> Love and Louis XIV: pages 3-35
3. *Jean Jacques Rousseau: Restless Genius*: pages 1-40
4. *Balzac: A Biography*: pages 3-42
5. I>Madame Curie: A Biography: pages 3-59

Before reading the biographies, all students in the group will go to a website and look up their subject.

Websites are given in the student resources. The group members will bring in printouts to school and make a timeline of the life of their subject including the most salient features of their lives. This will be displayed alongside the master timeline at the appropriate point in time.

Students will read the assigned biographies at home and fill out the same kind of organizer modeled in Activity 4. Each pivotal moment written in the organizer must have the page number for easy reference. Students will also be asked to find images of the life and times of the individuals in the internet so that there can be a discussion about how to represent the subject and his world. Groups will reconvene in class and discuss the 20-25 scene graphic biography that they will produce. There will be four images to each page. The content and drawings of each page will be roughly drawn out together in class. Students who are more artistic will help design the drawings and roughly execute them and others will work on the dialogue collaborating to try to ensure grammatical and lexical accuracy. Each student will work on his page and draw it with more care and color it. He will also write the dialogue on a separate page and submit it for correction and grading. This will be part of the student's individual grade for the project. After the text has been checked for accuracy, each student will add the text to the drawings.

When the graphic biographies are completed, the pages will be scanned into PDF form and put into PowerPoint presentations. Groups will present their work, each student reading a role or part of the narration. Students will receive grades for their work. The grades will be determined for the following criteria:

- Drawings – clear, attractive, careful
- Text – clear, understandable and accurate
- Story line – clear chronology and through-line. Clear direction.
- Presentation – clear, understandable, fluent and accuracy of accent.
- Interest – reader's interest held from start to finish

Each aspect will be graded out of 10 points to give a maximum total of 50. Each student in the class will grade the other presentations on the same scale as the teacher and add a comment in French about one aspect of the presentation that he found particularly interesting and one aspect that he felt could be improved. Each student will submit his part of the biography to receive an individual grade. The feedback from the class will be passed on to the groups for discussion afterwards. Assessments will be given to the groups without the names of the students.

## **Activity 6**

This is an activity for individual students to complete. Each student will be issued a template to make a cube. The template will require students to write information about their lives for each side. Students will write the information in French so that a French presenter could talk about them to an audience. They will write about themselves as if they are influential adults. Students will think about their own personalities and interests and project the trajectory their lives may take. This information will be written in French first on paper for submission to the teacher and then, when any necessary corrections have been made, on the various facets of the cube:

1. Qui suis-je? A description of personality and interests.
2. Où suis-je né(e)? A description of birthplace including at least one interesting fact which is relevant to their future.
3. Jeunesse. A description of youth - including at least one pivotal moment which helped decide the course of their lives. The pivotal moment should be a real moment in their lives.

4. Études: Where they studied, what they studied and why. How has this been important to their lives?
5. Citation: A quotation that has inspired them and why it has been important in their lives. The quotation must also be in French.
6. Vie adulte: Where they are living as adults and what their accomplishments have been. Details of their personal lives. This is obviously fictitious but should seem to flow naturally from their youth and interests.

Students will present these in short oral presentations to their groups.

## Activity 7

This activity will conclude and bring together the unit. Students will assess the unit on a ten-point scale using the following criteria:

- Biography: student's level of interest.
- Biography: quantity and quality of information learned.
- Graphic novel: student's level of interest.
- Graphic novel: quantity and quality of information learned.
- History: student's level of interest.
- History: quantity and quality of information learned.
- French: how much the unit helped the student's spoken French.
- French: how much the unit benefited the student's written French.
- Group work: quality of the group's performance.
- Individual work: how beneficial the experience was.
- Reflection about student's own life: how beneficial the experience was.

Students will also write a comment on the unit that may be negative or positive but must be explained. The questionnaire and the student comments will be written in French.

The students' graphic biographies will be displayed and shown to other French students. They may also be used as historical readers for level three students. This will encourage students to have pride in their work and feel a sense of accomplishment at the end of the unit.

## Notes

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## Appendix A

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### **North Carolina State Standards Addressed.**

The following list of standards addressed is not intended to be an exhaustive listing.

STRANDS: LISTENING, READING, SPEAKING, WRITING

COMPETENCY GOAL 3: PRESENTATIONAL COMMUNICATION – The learner will present information, concept, and ideas to an audience of listeners or readers on a variety of topics in the target language.

Objective 3.05: Summarize and interpret information from authentic material orally and in writing.

COMPETENCY GOAL 4: CULTURES – The learner will gain knowledge and demonstrate understanding of the relationship among practices, products, and perspectives, of cultures other than his/her own.

Objective 4.04: Examine historical and contemporary literature and the arts in order to understand the cultural practices and perspectives of the target cultures.

Objective 4.06: Discuss the influence of important people, events, and achievements of the target countries on their own and other cultures.

COMPETENCY GOAL 5: COMPARISONS -The learner will develop insight into the nature of language and culture by comparing his/her own language(s) and culture(s) to others.

Objective 5.06: Understand selected economic, political, and social events that have shaped the target culture and their relationship to the United States across time.

COMPETENCY GOAL 6: CONNECTIONS - The learner will acquire, reinforce, and further his/her knowledge of other disciplines through the foreign language.

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