

## Writing a Memoir through Critical Exploration of the Autobiography

*Allison Davis*  
Lanier Middle School

### INTRODUCTION

We live in a country that affords us the right of free speech and thought. I feel it is absolutely necessary that we be a literate public, aware of not only what's happening in the world but also how to evaluate what information is valid. We must also know how to access and use information provided to us. It is essential, then, that we know how we fit into the world, and how we can make a contribution to a democratic society.

That being said, the United States is a country built on many different cultural backgrounds. Countless immigrants pour into the U.S. daily. There are over 11 million undocumented immigrants in the United States (Kahn). How does a new citizen differentiate between their past culture and their new identity as an American? Do they have to differentiate, or are they creating a new life that resembles a type of mosaic of beliefs and traditions? Do they feel like they have a voice in this new country; does democracy really apply to them? Can they affect change? These are the questions that plague many of my students because most of them either are immigrants or their parents were immigrants.

Furthermore, my students come from culturally diverse backgrounds with little interest in reading and writing. I teach reading and writing at Lanier Middle School, which is 2/3 Gifted and Talented/Vanguard, and the other 1/3 is comprised of the Academic Cluster or the cluster bleakly referred to as "the neighborhood students." The children in this cluster are made up of 60% Hispanic, 30% African-American, 8% Caucasian, and 2% Asian. These are the students I teach, and most come from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Some of them deal with a language barrier while others feel living a literate life isn't going to pay their parents' bills, baby sit their siblings, or offer them anything worthy of their time. They don't see the immediate payoff of literacy.

I see so much of myself in my students at this age: longing to find their place, not sure how school fits into their associations with peers. Did I really have a stake in American society as an adolescent? How does what I learn in school really help me in the real world? Is school for me? These are questions I would constantly contemplate as a preteen, but I never really found answers to until I had moved through the system. I want to "hook" my students into living a literate, well-informed life by supporting their inquiries and by helping them to find the answers through their work in my class.

Therefore, I believe a unit in which we examine the autobiography as well as write our own memoirs will help students to connect to literature in a way that is personal—not only because the memoir will be their story but also because these stories are real. By examining these texts and writing in the genre, students will be able to begin to differentiate between fact and fiction. It's my job to open up the world of reading and writing to them. It's my responsibility that they go into the world if not loving to read and write, then at the very least knowing how to use reading and writing as a tool to become responsible citizens with a stake in what happens to them.

So, the cards are always stacked against me as I impart the importance of living a literate life. Autobiographical works of literature give students a full picture of the power of the written word. Instead of looking at life through the lens of the here and the now, students begin to see the whole picture of why someone's life was worth writing about, why *their* lives are worth writing about.

Furthermore, the genre of memoir and autobiography allows me, as a teacher, to demonstrate to students the power of our own lives in literature: how literature is made up of the everyday trials, tribulations and joys, which equate to life. By reading an array of multicultural autobiographical works, my students will hopefully identify with some of the characters in these narratives. They may use these stories as mentor texts, or simply enjoy how each central character overcame obstacles that made them the person they are today.

By writing our own memoirs, we will begin to see how we are not only different but also similar. We will demonstrate that our lives are worth writing about and what matters most to us as individuals. As Katherine Bomer states, "Writing an autobiography or a memoir helps satisfy those longings and brings clarity to the events and relationships that haunt us" (Bomer xiii).

## **UNIT BACKGROUND**

This six-week unit will be a writing unit focused on publishing an individual memoir, while at the same time, examining autobiographical works as a point of reference. When embarking on a writing unit such as a memoir, it's important that students are immersed in the genre by my reading aloud and demonstrating through lessons, the style and craft of various authors to whom most students in the classroom can relate.

Either through cultural or socioeconomic status, providing a connection for your students to the unit of study is the best way to build interest and sell them on the unit. You can connect students to the study of memoir by providing texts in which most if not all can identify. Then, the students are encouraged to find their own mentor texts from which to draw insight about craft and make personal connections.

Then, we will become memoirists, reflecting on the triumphs and defeats, the familial relationships and traditions, growing pains, educational milestones, etc. The students will reflect and share their writing with other members of the class to find similarities and differences or perhaps to spark a long-lost memory. Through writing, sharing, drafting, revising, and celebrating or publishing our works, we expose individual accounts as well as a shared community full of diverse backgrounds and experiences.

The purpose of teaching this unit is to support students' ease of writing by writing about what they know well: themselves and also apply critical examination of autobiographical texts. Identity is an obstacle that every middle school student will face as they enter the world of adolescence.

### **The Autobiography**

Because I teach both reading and writing in a single block of an hour and thirty minutes, the study of autobiographical works will take up the reading portion of class time which is forty-five minutes. The lesson lasts for ten to fifteen minutes; then there will be independent reading time of twenty-five minutes and finally a share time of five minutes. It's important to start the unit in memoir with as many examples as possible for students to sift through. Reading excerpts aloud to students can help to sell students on a particular book. They always want to read more. I think it would be beneficial to look at the autobiography and its place in this unit of study.

There has been a long debate throughout the literature community about whether or not autobiography fits into historical fiction or factual literature. In an *American Quarterly* article written to place the genre of autobiography in literature rather than history, Robert Sayre states,

“They are a history in that they are source materials, containing facts, preserving the past, and drawing lessons from it. They are literature in that they must please and entertain as well as teach. And like both history and literature, they have to select and narrate” (Sayres 242).

So, autobiography is currently placed in the genre of nonfiction literature. Anything fictional will not be seen as an autobiographical work. Embellishing language, not events, are what sets autobiographies aside from works of fiction. This is especially important to teach my students because I believe memoir embellishes events more so than the traditional autobiography. It is imperative that my students draw distinctions between works of fiction and nonfiction because they can use this skill when they later evaluate sources of information and the validity of that information. History is not always an accurate account.

### **Autobiography as a Tool in Which to Understand Our Heritage**

Autobiography is also a tool used to define a civilization through oneself (Sayres 250). This takes us back to the question of what it means to be an American. My experience with my America has to be completely different from most of my students not simply because of culture differences but also because of experiences. Most of my students are sons and daughters of modern day immigrants. I come from immigrants, but it was so far up the family tree that I have no contact with the way life must have been for them.

Likewise, my African American students come from immigrants from a long time ago, but they didn't come here looking for a better life. They were forced to come here and work for free in sometimes abhorrent conditions. We all make up the community of our English class, which is also a microcosm of the American society we live in outside of class. Who are we in this melting pot, and what ideas do we champion?

By looking at autobiographies, we can see the way things were and the way people thought or currently think about the America we know, and how we fit in to this society. America has so many autobiographies in numerous categories possibly because to be American means to be concerned with self-interests. This whole idea goes back to manifest destiny (Holte 25). It leads us into the commercial nation we've become (33). James Craig Holte states the reason for the popularity of autobiography in America as:

The autobiography is one way of imposing order on change, and perhaps one reason for the popularity of this form in America is related to the feeling of rootlessness felt by so many Americans; it is no surprise that those Americans who have experienced this uprootedness most dramatically, immigrant and ethnic Americans, have produced a large body of autobiographical writing (39).

### **The Memoir**

The difference between autobiography and memoir is slight, but one that needs to be addressed. Both are works of nonfiction, but memoir tends to be less factual and based more on the events of a life as indelible moments wrapped together in a rich narrative. Those stories that lend us to our own self-image are what comprise the memoir. In *Ethnic Biography and Autobiography*, William Boelhower states, “...the question of identity involves matching the narrator's own self-conception with the self that is recognized by others, so as to establish a continuity between the two (self and world), to give a design to the self-in-the-world” (12).

The question of identity is one that may be resolved or unresolved in a Memoir, while an autobiography details not the identity so much as factual accounts of someone famous. Students should view their lives from not only their perspectives, but also the perspectives of others. Teaching dialogue in this unit brings out the thoughts and opinions of others while slowly solidifying an identity within the context of a story. Lucy Calkins of the Teacher's College at

Columbia University quotes Virginia Woolf to explain her thoughts on memoir, “A memoir, she says, is not what happens but to whom things happen” (*The Art of Teaching Writing*, 401).

Critical questions: I will ask my students if their views of themselves are shared by their peers; their parents? How do events shape who they are? How might their perceptions of themselves differ if they came from a different background with different experiences? Do they feel like they have an active stake in society?

Since students will be writing their own memoir, it will be necessary to look at several works that are included in this genre. We will discuss the differences between memoir and autobiography, and create a piece that resembles a point in their lives; paying particular attention to style, craft and theme. Because this will be the writing my class creates, I will share picture books that will help them hone in on the style in which they want to write their pieces.

### **Memoirs as a Means to an End**

It seems that with The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), students are under a significant amount of pressure to pass and even exceed the minimum standards. Teachers are required to prep students for a test which focuses not on the progress they've made as writers, but on their performance on a specific day, regardless of the individual or situation of that individual (Bomer 175).

Memoirs are powerful pieces of writing that can help students with standardized tests. It allows them to write freely about a subject they know a lot about, while teaching the fundamentals of a coherent piece of writing. They are no longer writing a story they wouldn't read themselves, share with someone else, or use to think about bigger ideas such as what's happening in the world around them. Most test prompts ask students to retrieve some sort of memory from their past (Bomer 175).

It seems logical then, that memoir becomes a unit of study in any grade in which students are required to pass a state or federal writing test. Challenging students during a test prep unit might encourage students to use parts of a completed memoir to fit various prompts (Bomer 185). Though test prep is not part of this particular unit of study, I do believe there is merit in examining the places we might use this piece to help our students succeed on tests.

### **IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGY**

I will begin this unit of study of memoir by providing my own accounts of indelible moments: chronicling the days of my senior year in high school, hunting trips with my father, family traditions and get-togethers, and the summers spent playing with the neighborhood kids. This is an ideal way to start the process of sharing who we are by modeling my own accounts. Then I will bring excerpts from various authors who have written in the genre, usually a passage from a text with high interest and relevance to the students.

Then, the students begin to write in their writers' notebooks about their own moments, capturing the folklore of their past and the creation of their thoughts and heritage. Sharing the work that we do daily with a partner or a neighbor is central to creating a shared community as writers, and it can give rise to ideas about situations or times in their lives that they hadn't thought about before. They spend weeks learning strategies within the genre of memoir while improving their craft of writing. Then they take their ideas out of their notebooks and move to publish and celebrate that final piece that took every ounce of who they are to create.

### **The Read Aloud: Providing a Context to Enhance and Enrich Student Comprehension**

Reading aloud is perhaps the single most important aspect of this unit. It invites students to experience the parts of the passages from these books as I did when I studied them in the seminar. By reading aloud and having book talks about the passages, I can impart concepts such as style,

craft and why these people felt out of place as Americans. The students and I begin to have a shared sense of what a memoir is, what it could be and what it could be used for (Calkins, *The Art of Teaching Reading* 51) Throughout the day, I will read the same passages out loud and for different purposes (Calkins, *The Art of Teaching Reading* 43).

Also, there are moments, themes and structures that can only be addressed through a read aloud. I will use excerpts from Jimmy Santiago Baca's *A Place to Stand*, Francisco Jimenez's, *The Circuit*, Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street*, and Lan Cao's *Monkey Bridge*. I will also use picture book read alouds, such as *When I was Young in the Mountains* and *When the Relatives Came* by Cynthia Rylant, *Thank You, Mr. Falker*, by Patricia Polacco, and *Owl Moon* by Jane Yolen, to demonstrate various parts of memoir, so the students understand how to create an indelible moment, an anecdote, and a vignette and how to string these moments together or expand on a particular moment in time. Picture books are sometimes more accessible to students who have little exposure to literature and provide vivid images of the author's accounts (Calkins, *The Art of Teaching Reading* 54).

Therefore, there are many works in which my students might find some relevance to their lives. An examination of this genre might produce readers of nonreaders while instilling a sense of pride in heritage. I have selected several books from which I will take passages and read them aloud to the class as mentor texts for style and craft. These books were part of my seminar study, and I have found great uses for them in my unit of study:

#### ***A Place to Stand* by Jimmy Santiago Baca**

This is an autobiographical work that details the life of a convict before entering prison, his life inside a maximum security prison, and how he managed to make a life after prison. The reason I have selected passages from this text for use in my curriculum unit is for the purpose of craft. Baca's use of language is masterful, "The wind reclined in flame and flung itself to sleep, played with tumbleweeds, untwined itself like a slow-opening music box, and gave to the naked woman sleeping with her lover, a threadbare love song, to the man meditating on life under a tree its lyrical wounds" (152). There is powerful imagery in his word choice. But it's also important to note his choice of punctuation and how it moves the piece along as if you're almost floating on that wind Baca describes.

Though the story is powerful, only specific passages will be shared with students because some of the content could be racy for my middle school students. But Baca is more a poet than a writer of books and that exudes in his autobiographical prose.

#### ***Monkey Bridge* by Lan Cao**

Another text that will support style as well as theme is *Monkey Bridge* by Lan Cao. This story of a displaced Vietnamese family consisting of solely a mother and a daughter during the Viet Nam war, is beautifully written, and it will give my students a different perspective of the immigrant experience to the United States than the more prevalent Mexican-American saga to which most of my students can relate.

It's interesting because although there are thousands of immigrants who come to America from Mexico daily, Cao refers to the "largest single movement of people in the history of America itself" (165). The day that the South Vietnamese surrendered to the North was April 30, 1975.

She tells the story by switching between the life the daughter and mother share in their new homeland and her mother's journal, which is the only way she, the daughter, can truly get to know her mother, for her mother does not speak of how she feels openly. She believes her daughter is a

sellout to the American way of life, but would never tell her, while her daughter desperately yearns to know about her past.

Also, I found the vocabulary in this book to be quite exquisite and easy to figure out in context. This would be a good book to use for a vocabulary study as well that I can incorporate during the memoir unit on our short days reserved for Professional Development.

### ***The Circuit by Francisco Jimenez***

This autobiographical text will be by far the best for providing a solid connection by which my students will buy into the unit. Jimenez tells the story of his life as a child of a migrant farmer whose family constantly moves to avoid "La Migra," or the immigration police. This book's passages will be used for content and themes in which my students will be asked if their experiences connect to any of the themes or author's feelings in the passages. Jimenez is also a master at imagery; you can see the tent and dirt floor that he had to inhabit. You can feel the terror of his mother who didn't know where to go when her baby became sick.

These works will be introduced throughout the unit. Hopefully, students can relate to Jimenez' works and use them as mentor pieces on style and craft for their own memoir writing.

### ***The House on Mango Street by Sandra Cisneros***

This memoir is a collection of vignettes about a young Latina girl named Esperanza growing up in a rough neighborhood in Chicago. She learns through experience to accept what she can't change, but always hope for a better life. It is a moving story about the Latina experience.

This book will be used as an example of vignettes: short yet powerful and moving moments in time. Vignettes are different than anecdotes because you are not tying the story to something else you are trying to explain as is the case of an anecdote. Vignettes are simply the short scenes in our life or any story. You may put them together as a collection, but they could really stand on their own.

### **The Writing Process: Moving Beyond the Writer's Notebook**

After immersing them in the genre, students will begin to write about their own experiences that are important to them as well as moments and people that make up how they see themselves. They will describe a moment from a picture, describe an object as though it was the first time they saw it. They will begin to write about what they might feel is "very mundane" adding details that make the moment, place, or person unique to them as individuals. They will write about issues they feel strongly about and how these issues connect to them as members of American society.

They will use strategies learned in class to generate ideas and write about those moments in different ways, adding dialogue and inner thinking. We will come back to parts of the books read aloud as a class and see how we can use the text as a mentor piece for how we want our memoir to look.

They will have practice writing leads so that the reader connects with them and their experiences as much as possible from the beginning of their piece. They will look at several mentor pieces of their choosing to see how their favorite authors start their passages. Critical Questions: Why do you like the way this particular author writes? What connects you as a reader?

Then, they will enter the world of the writing process by beginning to draft, stringing together the indelible moments they feel are the most important parts of who they are and what's important to them. The students will take their seed ideas to form a complete story. Through sharing, they can decide with peers which parts are the most exciting as well as which moments fit together to

complete a whole narrative. The significant parts of their culture, traditions, and heritage—and how they play into their identity as Americans—will guide their memoir draft.

Subsequently, they will embark upon revision of the draft through peer editing. Several lessons will promote their cracking open of words and sentences (Heard 11) as well as word choice: illustrating images (Heard 69 -72). The revision part of the memoir should at least be a week. Students often fail to recognize the significance of revision and therefore continue with their work as if it is a finished product. Revisiting the piece means adding detail and deleting erroneous parts which might interfere with the central elements for a polished piece of writing.

Editing follows where they look for grammatical errors, as well as errors in punctuation and spelling. The final product should be something that they wouldn't mind the whole school reading: a reflective piece that is well written, well thought out, and ready to share with the rest of the world. It will be a piece of work that gives them reasons to think beyond what they thought of as identity, but in essence, it will connect them to a greater whole.

Several works will be read aloud and accessed again in part for mentor pieces. Picture books provide a clear, concrete image of the work we do as memoirists. Below, I have listed several works for use in the curriculum unit for writing:

### ***When I was Young in the Mountains* by Cynthia Rylant**

This picture book consists of a collection of indelible moments Rylant has of growing up in the mountains. Each moment takes place throughout an entire period in her life. They are not necessarily in order, but they provide a partial account of the time she spent as a child there. They are like pictures taken that have a special relevance. Her daily activities and special moments with her grandparents and brother create a whole picture of who she is.

I will use this book to teach students how to string together moments in time to create a story. Students will also see how to focus in on one particular moment. This book is accessible to students because it provides pictures and the narrative is one sentence per page.

### ***When the Relatives Came* by Cynthia Rylant**

Another picture book by Rylant offers a one-time event that includes several moments during a summer when her relatives come to visit. Rylant uses several scenes that show the differences between her cousins, aunts and uncles, and the fun they had learning about their different ways.

I will use this book to show students that they may write a memoir based on a particular event in their lives where they might discover part of their identity. Rylant discovers that these relatives are an important part of who she is, but also realizes the differences that make her who she and her relatives are, while she celebrates the quirkiness of her relatives. Students will be asked to write about an event that they remember vividly, one they shared with family members or friends. They will need to explain why they think this moment was memorable and if it makes up a portion of who they are and how they think about the world.

### ***Thank you, Mr. Falker* by Patricia Polacco**

This story is one of my favorites, not only for the plot, but also for the message and illustrations. Polacco reflects on her early grade school years when reading was a daunting task; not because she was a reluctant reader, but because of her learning disability. She faced bullies and felt alienated from peers until one special teacher took the time to work through her disability.

The story weaves in and out of lessons she learns at school and through her family. It ends with her seeing this teacher later in life where she thanks him for not giving up on her. She then

goes on to tell him that she now writes children's stories. These moments clearly define who she became.

I will show students how to capitalize on plot, key moments, and imagery. This story lays the foundation for which they could build their narrative. Students will be asked to write an entry about someone who helped them and whether or not they think it made a difference in who they are or how they would approach a particular situation.

### ***Babushka's Doll* by Patricia Polacco**

I absolutely have a great time reading this story aloud, and the kids love it, too. It's about a bratty child who is very demanding of her grandmother. Her grandmother goes to the store just as she spots a doll on the shelf. All of a sudden, the doll comes to life and gives the bratty child a run for the money. This is a sort of fable wrapped into an indelible moment. I wouldn't call a doll coming to life as part of a nonfiction text such as memoir, but those times in our lives could be described just as richly as what happened between the girl and the doll.

I would use this story to show the author's use of description, dialogue, and inner thinking within the memoir writing unit. We will examine the grandmother's intentions by leaving her alone with the doll. Are there moments in your life where you learned a valuable lesson? Students will write about a time they might have learned a valuable lesson. They will then revisit these entries throughout the week and add dialogue and inner thinking.

### ***Owl Moon* by Jane Yolen**

In this narrative supplied with breath-taking art, Yolen describes a one-time moment where she went "owling" with her father. It was something she always heard about but was never old enough to experience. She builds a vivid image of every part of her first time adventure through words and pictures.

I will use this text as a read aloud and may refer to it later in the unit for the purpose of providing a mentor piece from which students can capitalize on moments in time that are part of who they are as individuals. Students will be shown the difference between a one-time moment and a series of snapshots like we saw in Rylant's *When I was Young in the Mountains*. Students will then begin to string together their moments from their notebook to drafting paper. Writing about these photographic moments using every word carefully can create a powerful memoir.

## **LESSONS FOR PRODUCING A MEMOIR**

### **Lesson One**

Since the unit begins with the immersion of my students into the genre of memoir, I will start by telling some of my own indelible moments. I will tell them about the time I went deer hunting with my dad, and I asked him for the deer's eye. I will tell them about the time I tried to sneak out and was caught and about hitting a cone while I was being tested for my driver's license.

I will ask them if they have memories that they will never forget. I will explain to them that none of these incidences are linked, except for the fact that they happened to me when I was younger. The first activity gets them into the idea behind a memoir. I will then explain what a memoir is and give a definition. I will explain that the next few days we will be diving into the genre of memoir. Once completed, students will have a point of origin for their memoirs and a shared idea of what a memoir includes.



### ***Materials***

- Moments of self-realization, which are an important part of who you think you are (teacher)
- Writer's notebook
- Blue or black pen
- Chart paper, newsprint or overhead projector
- Transparencies of passages
- Copies of passages read
- Glue sticks

### ***Objectives***

Students will be able to identify various elements of memoir, and craft their own indelible moments. Shared experiences will prompt students to think of more memories while creating a shared sense of importance.

### ***Activity One***

After sharing my indelible moments, students are then invited to go off on their own write in their writer's notebook about a time they will never forget. They will have fifteen minutes to complete their entry. After fifteen minutes, they turn and talk to a neighbor about what they wrote and why they felt it was an important moment. This share time is limited to about five minutes. The group reconvenes as a large group by the overhead, and we discuss times that we felt were important to us. I start to list these moments on chart paper so the whole class has a running list of indelible moments to help them spark a long-lost memory.

### ***Activity Two***

Because my daily classes are divided into two subject areas (reading and writing), the next activity is geared more toward reading and noticing the author's craft. I will read passages from Jimmy Santiago Baca's *A Place to Stand*. I will think aloud various aspects of the author's craft and style that I notice, such as imagery, punctuation, and sentence structure. I will then continue to read parts of excerpts taken from the passage that are incredibly moving and filled with imagery. I will pass out copies of these passages along with glue sticks, so they can keep them secured in their notebooks for later use as a mentor text. They will glue the copies into their notebooks. This should take no longer than two minutes.

It's imperative that you have enough glue sticks to go around, so you can stay on schedule. I will continue to read from the passage, and I will stop and ask them to turn to their neighbors and talk about what I've read, paying particular attention to style and craft. I will copy their responses as I move around the room and share with the whole class insightful comments about the author's craft and style I overheard as they shared for one or two minutes.

### ***Evaluation***

Part of the evaluation comes in the form of sharing and listening to student responses to the text. Their writers' notebooks become a powerful way to evaluate if they understand what you taught in the lesson and assess whether students are able to complete the required task of remembering an important moment in their lives and writing about it enthusiastically in their notebooks. Subsequent lessons will focus on developing those moments as well as a sense of why those moments make us the people that we are.

### ***Lesson Two***

Students will have practice capturing moments in time and adding details to what seem to be the mundane, everyday experiences of our lives. They will be able to embellish events using descriptive language rather than the fabrication of events.

### ***Materials***

- An everyday object that can take on a unique flair such as a flower in a pot or a musical instrument
- One photo of an important moment that the student brings from home
- Sketches of an important moment
- Overhead projector
- Chart paper or newsprint
- Writers' notebooks
- Blue or black pen

### ***Objective***

The goals for these lessons are designed for students to gain the skill of writing about something they may have seen before in detail and then usage of that skill when crafting their individual memoirs.

### ***Activity One***

Students are presented with a familiar object such as the musical instrument, a recorder. I begin to model on the overhead how I see this object as I write about it: It's a column for which sound blows through for those who are able to master its chords. The holes dictate sounds while the rest of it looks like a chew toy my dog would have enjoyed on any afternoon. It's color, a mahogany that rests with memories of dust and nonuse. What is it for, then, this archaic piper of an instrument? Are we kidding ourselves of a rat population, or is someone learning a skill long since passed?

The students then look at the flower in the pot. They have to describe it as if they are seeing this flower for the first time in all its wonder, glory, or faults. They write about the flower for fifteen minutes and then share their writing with a neighbor. I move around the room and record blurbs of conversations, which I read to the class in a large group share. Students volunteer to read during the large group share. Student responses are recorded on chart paper.

### ***Activity Two***

Students bring a photograph from home that marks an indelible moment in their life. If they don't have a photo, or forget to bring a photo, they may draw a quick sketch of the moment. I demonstrate by showing a photo of the day I graduated from college. I describe the look I have in the photo and provide my inner thoughts as they probably were happening on that day.

Students turn to their own photos or sketches and write their own interpretations of what was going on at that very moment. Later lessons will produce more detail and depth surrounding that moment. We share as a large group. I allow about three shares per large group meeting and record them on chart paper to place in the classroom.

### ***Evaluation***

The substance of this evaluation will be recorded in the writer's notebook under strategies used. Most students who move on from this lesson to subsequent revision work will probably have a solid memoir. We will bring these memoirs out throughout the course of the year to evaluate our progress as writers. We will also revisit them for the sake of making them better pieces.

### **Lesson Three**

The purpose of this lesson is to teach students the power of a vignette in memoir, but also to show that it is a style, not a requirement. A vignette is a scene which can include many facets of everyday life even though I'm going to encourage my students to focus on the scenes they

remember throughout their lives, and then think about how a particular scene might have something to do with the person they've become.

### ***Materials***

- Readers' notebooks
- Writers' notebooks
- Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* excerpts
- Copies of passages read
- Overhead transparency of passages read
- Glue sticks

### ***Objective***

Students will use multicultural text to understand the concept of vignettes. Students will write their own vignettes for the purpose of possibly using this style of writing for their memoirs.

### ***Activity One***

I will explain that a vignette is a short moment in time, almost a snapshot that is relevant to the whole of the story. An author uses this style of writing to capture a moment and then move on. It is seen as part of the whole story. In memoir, it is used to tell the important events that eventually link together to tell a person's story. I will read to the students the vignettes "The House on Mango Street" and "Hairs" from *The House on Mango Street* while I think aloud what I think is important about these vignettes to the students as well as what is happening in the story.

I will then ask the class critical questions such as: Why they think these vignettes might be an important part of the whole story? Do you think that someone might have made her feel bad about where she lived or the hair she had? Why does she expound upon the differences of hair in her family? They write for five minutes using these critical questions as a guide.

Then, the students will be asked to turn to their neighbor and share what they wrote. Are their thoughts alike or not the same as their neighbor's? Then they discuss the reasons for their responses and offer constructive criticism. I will move around the room and record various conversations that I think made for great literary discussions. During the group share, I will ask the students I documented to invite the rest of the class in on their discussion. The students will glue copied passages into their notebooks to be used later as mentor texts for vignettes (2 – 4 minutes).

### ***Activity Two***

I will read the vignette: "There Was an Old Woman She Had So Many Children She Didn't Know What to Do." I will stop intermittently through the beginning of this vignette, thinking aloud what I think about the style and author's craft. I will then continue to read and ask students to turn and talk about the text with a neighbor, keeping in mind what they noticed about why Cisneros put this vignette in her memoir. I will move around the room and record responses that I will share as a large group. Then, students are prompted to spend fifteen minutes writing their own vignette from a time in their life. They may take an entry they have already written and adapt it to the style Cisneros uses. Critical questions: How does this fit in with my idea of myself? How does this event shape not only who I am, but also what others think of me?

### ***Activity Three***

Read Aloud of Cynthia Rylant's picture book *When I was Young in the Mountains*.

As I read aloud to the students, I stop and make note of how these are particular snapshots during a time in her life. They are not necessarily in order, but she is able to string these moments

together by using a common theme. Students will string together their moments in their notebooks that will make up a certain time period in their lives. They will begin to envision their memoir either as selected parts of a one-time moment, vignettes dealing with a certain theme, or many moments during a certain time period pulled together as if creating a photo album.

### ***Evaluation***

Through share time, I can assess whether students have an understanding of what I am teaching as well as what is being asked of them. They will have critical questions to answer in their readers' notebooks and sample vignettes in their writers' notebooks that will be graded based on a rubric that I coauthor with my students.

## **ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY**

### **Works Cited**

- Boelhower, William. "The Brave New World of Immigrant Autobiography," *Ethnic Biography and Autobiography*. 9 (1982): 5-23, MELUS. (1982): 2.  
In this journal article William Boelhower discusses the importance of immigrant autobiography and the discrepancies between the problems of leaving the old world reality and having to fit into the new world ideal.
- Bomer, Katherine. *Writing a Life*. Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2005.  
Katherine Bomer details why writing a memoir is important for young writers not only to experience the joy of writing but also to learn about themselves as individuals.
- Calkins, Lucy. *The Art of Teaching Reading*. New York: Addison-Wesley Educational Publishers, 2001.  
Lucy Calkins explains the importance of structures in the reading workshop such as Read Alouds.
- . *The Art of Teaching Writing*. Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1986.  
Lucy Calkins eloquently describes the writing experience through memoir writing and reading with a critical lens.
- Heard, Georgia. *The Revision Toolbox*. Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2002.  
Georgia Heard makes revision the fun part of writing.
- Holte, James, C. "The Representative Voice: Autobiography and the Ethnic Experience." *Ethnic Biography and Autobiography*. 9(1982): 25-46, MELUS. 9 (1982): 2.  
James Holte discusses different movements in the ethnic population of America who write autobiographies.
- Kahn, Carrie. "Citizen Applications Jump up This Year." *All Things Considered*. NPR, 5 July 2006. 4 July 2006 <[www.npr.org](http://www.npr.org)>.  
This broadcast by Carrie Kahn discusses the problem of immigration and the number of applications for citizenship recently submitted.
- Sayre, Robert, F. "The Proper Use-Autobiographies in American Studies," . 29 (1977): 241-262, *American Quarterly*. 3 (1977).  
Robert Sayre makes the case for the autobiography as a means of studying our culture and society.

### **Supplemental Sources**

- Baca, Jimmy, Santiago. *A Place to Stand*. 2001.
- Cao, Lan. *Monkey Bridge*. 1997.
- Cisneros, Sandra. *The House on Mango Street*. 1984.
- Jiminez, Francisco. *The Circuit*. 1997.
- Polacco, Patricia. *Babushka's Doll*. 1995.
- . *Thank you, Mr. Falker*. 2001.
- Rylant, Cynthia. *The Relatives Came*. 1993.
- . *When I Was Young in the Mountains*. 1993.
- Yolen, Jane. *Owl Moon*. 1987.