

## Discovering Roots and Voices through Autobiography

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### INTRODUCTION

This unit is intended for a mixed 6th, 7th, and 8th grade level heterogeneously grouped enrichment class and focuses on the genre of autobiography as a vehicle to aid students in the discovery, research, and capture of a portion of their family's history. The semester long unit is intended to develop and support higher level thinking skills as students expand their understanding of their own and others' cultures and experiences leading to a deeper appreciation for diversity. Included are an overview of literature appropriate for use in either middle or high school classroom and a brief description of the use and organization of literature circles. Culminating projects include research, product development, and presentation of a published class anthology.

### BACKGROUND

I realize how very fortunate I am to come from a "reading" family. One of my first memories is thinking I "knew" how to read because I could recite from memory my favorite Little Golden Book story about a new baby coming home from the hospital. As I did learn how to create meaning from those squiggly lines on the page, I discovered a new home in the land of books. In these uncharted places, I could choose and have control over the stories' endings, the places I visited, and the images that floated through my mind like cartoon balloons filled with the characters' dialogue. One could classify me as an English geek or the personification of an English teacher's dream student.

As all my immediate family members embraced reading, it is only natural that my love of reading was nurtured from toddler-hood. At times the family competition for quarterly *The Reader's Digest Condensed Book* was brutally fierce and was often settled by my father's patriarchal claim of privilege. Summers were spent in cut-throat reading contests between my mother, brother, and me. I remember leaving the public library, struggling to keep the huge stack of books balanced beneath my chin, filled with determination to win the family reading challenge. The victor was allowed to purchase a book of their choice at the end of the season, and I wanted books. This form of entertainment was basically free, kept us quiet, and allowed us to travel to untold places through the words and experiences of others. During the school year, when bedtime was mandated, I would wait until the house was quiet, sneak into my large closet, stealthily turn on the light, and read until I fell asleep. My mother learned not to be alarmed if I wasn't in bed in the morning; she knew I would be asleep on the floor, book in hand.

Most middle school students I encounter do not share my exuberant appreciation for the written word. The time that I spent reading is, for them, filled with hours of reality TV, video games, e-mail, I-Pods, instant messaging, and other electronic stimuli that I can't even name, much less figure out how to turn on and use. Our society has grown accustomed to the immediate gratification of NOW with little notion of the joy of reading to the last page to find out "who done-it." Whenever I start a new novel with my classes, I can guarantee that I will be asked within the first five minutes if there is a movie made from the book. Most children don't want to

read; they want to watch. Hence, the challenges of helping them translate the written word into images in their minds based on the printed word.

Part of the challenge faced by English teachers is finding ways to help students connect to literature so that they can create their own meaning from someone else's story. I have learned that telling students to read silently and having them comply can be a fantasy. I will be happily sitting upon my stool, engrossed in a book, and look up to see Johnny gazing around the room, still on page 47 for the third class period in the book he checked out from the library because I told him he had to have a book. Meanwhile, other students are dutifully looking at the words on the page out of obedience but cannot tell me one thing that they remember from what they have spent the last thirty minutes reading. All too often, the timer will ding at the end of the prescribed silent reading time, and I will be the one that asks the class, "Do you mind if I finish this chapter? This is the really good part!" followed by, "Let me tell you about my book."

However, as teachers of reading and English, the opportunity to equip students with the desire and tools to help them become successful readers is great. I believe growth and achievement in these areas leads to improved self-image and a greater opportunity of lifetime achievement. But what do we teach? Should the focus be on the traditional literary cannon? Or on more contemporary young adult literature? Susan Giddings writes, "If we are to create a nation of readers, we must offer students material that is interesting and relevant. Available choices on reading lists need to shift from those which are the teachers' favorites to those preferred by students" (66). The current reading list and mandated curriculum fall short of ideal in providing literature with which students can identify. The canon of literature in today's curriculum is still largely focused on famous "dead white guys" like Shakespeare, Whitman, Poe, and Twain. The stories students are frequently asked to read are about characters and people with whom they cannot relate. The writing they are asked to do is all too often about subject matter that holds little or no meaning. These students may share with Jimmy Santiago Baca the feeling of being "...inferior in a white world, alien and ashamed," partially as a result of studying literature that bears no resemblance to the life that they and their families lead (4).

And while there is a cultural need to study and appreciate this literature, it can be a daunting and insurmountable hurdle to a child without the appropriate linguistic scaffolding. Research has shown that good teaching strategies support the student by providing tools that enable them to relate to experiences and stories that may or not be similar to their own.

## **UNIT BACKGROUND**

Studies continue to point to lower levels of proficiency in reading and writing achievement in Hispanic American and African-American students (Nichols). Simultaneously, the need for critical thinkers and writers in the economy is growing. Jago, citing Delpit's work, *Other People's Children*, points to the criticality of equipping students with "...skills within the context of critical thinking and reading" if they are to "...affect the change which will allow them to truly progress" (38). As a teacher at Johnston Middle School, I see a need for students to discover and gain perspective about the role their heritage plays in self-understanding as a part of the process of education. Located in southwest Houston, the school is rich in cultural diversity, with almost equal African-American (38%) and Hispanic (39%) student populations; 61% of our student body is classified as low economic status ("HISD Report Card"). In addition, Johnston is a fine arts magnet school, recognized throughout the area for achievements in music, art, dance, band, and orchestra. The diverse and dynamic faculty has initiated a variety of sports programs to address the needs and interests of students, including baseball, softball, and soccer teams. To me, this indicates that the canon of literature taught needs to include stories about people who are like our student population: those who are poor, who grew up in a broken or troubled home, who come

from racially mixed backgrounds, who like to play sports, and who can blend their abilities based on individual interests rather than cultural and peer-driven stereotypes.

I encounter many students who have had less than positive experiences with reading and writing. In *The Circuit*, Francisco Jimenez describes his earliest days of school when his head ached because he could not understand what the teacher was saying. She spoke only in English, and he understood only Spanish. I am reminded of a Snoopy cartoon where Charlie Brown and Lucy are listening to the teacher expound on some point of higher learning. As the students gaze blankly, the cartoon bubble above the teacher's head contains the nonsense words "whah, whah, whah, whah, whah." Whatever finer point she was attempting to communicate, any sort of meaningful message is lost. Jimenez ultimately decided it was worth the effort to learn how to decode the strange sounds his teacher and classmates made. It was his fascination with the class caterpillar, the book containing illustrations of butterflies and caterpillars, coupled with his exposure to these ethereal creatures in the fields in which his family toiled, that inspired him to seek the skills necessary to decipher the confusing code of letters printed on the pages. For Jimenez, it was his prior knowledge and experience, coupled with the thirst to understand more, that gave him the push to overcome his fear of reading.

When looking at reasons to explain the lower achievement levels of ethnically diverse and economically disadvantaged students, one finds many possible answers. There may be a lack of importance placed on education in a home where the focus is primarily on economic survival. Parents' education level can also contribute to a student's perceived importance of education. Primary language spoken in the home that deviates from Standard American English can also limit a student's comprehension and appreciation of literature. The extended nuclear family is often not available to families that are geographically spread which can result in a discontinuity in the passage of history and traditions. Or students may be placed in situations where their parents are physically unavailable. As a part of the "NOW-ness" of this generation, students may not be exposed (or want to be exposed) to the rich history their older family members have to share.

In my class this year, I have students who are trying to function with an incarcerated parent while living with a family friend or relative. Other students are being raised by older siblings because the biological parents are unable or unwilling to fulfill their parental role. There is a student who was kidnapped by a parent and held for an extended period of time at the beginning of the school year, and several students show the signs of physical abuse. On one level, it is easy to understand why these children are unwilling or unable to concentrate on reading comprehension when their physical survival appears to be in jeopardy. At the same time, if literature could be found that spoke more directly to these students, they might find hope or wisdom or comfort from the stories of others who found themselves in similar situations and have triumphed. As students learn that their experience may not be unique to their individual or cultural tradition, they might gain an appreciation for themselves and a greater sensitivity to those with whom they may not easily relate. At the same time, they may learn to appreciate and value the uniqueness of their heritage.

Part of the experience of learning to appreciate what the printed word has to offer is driven by understanding the context of the literature. If students can get past the thought that literature published before their birth year is old, outdated, and holds no relevance to their lives, then there is a possibility that the author's perspective holds some value for contemporary people. In addition to exposing students to literature that deals with germane topics and situations, this unit will explore strategies to help students discover and unpack the meaning of context. Working within the framework of what students know, strategies will be taught that build, or scaffold, off those existing skills.

One skill vital for students' success is the development of higher level thinking skills based on Bloom's Taxonomy. It is not enough for students to understand what happened in their reading; they need to look below the meaning of the printed words to dig for deeper levels of understanding. Surface level understanding results in superficial discussions which rob literature circles of dynamic discussion possibility. Once students begin to interpret literature independently, group discussions can become more dynamic. As Hamra says "disagreements...stimulate exactly the kind of high-level thinking we want students to use. The important thing is for learners to explain and support the reasoning they used to reach their decisions" (7).

This unit will encourage students' enjoyment and pleasure in reading by providing experiences with literature chosen for relevance to their background and experience coupled with skill-building strategies to enhance comprehension. With "...powerful stories to engage them" students will be better equipped to "...acquire the literacy skills they need" to become successful readers (Jago 2). Once children make a connection with a story, understand the plot, and have engaged in higher level discussions with their peers, those skills and strategies will be transferred to more challenging literature from the approved canon. It is hoped that students will gain an appreciation for the humanity of all people by discovering similarities in experiences.

Using the genres of memoir and autobiography, students will engage texts about young people whose experiences with adversity have led them to overcome and achieve some level of success in American society. While both genres include the recounting of the writer's life events, a memoir is often "less structured" and more focused around a part of life. Autobiography tends to encompass the chronological events of the author's life and to include more thoughts, feelings and memories (*Wikipedia*). Through the study of autobiography, students will develop writing and story-telling skills by creating personal memoirs, modeled after the work in *Forty Cent Tip*.

In addition to the tangible educational impact of developing greater reading comprehension and improved writing skills, this unit will also expose students to cultures beyond their experience. It is important that educators introduce a global perspective wherever possible – to provide another point of view or way of experiencing life. The two works by Francisco Jimenez raise issues about the life of migrant farm workers, described by Lucas Benitez, a farm worker and labor organizer, as "one of exploitation" coupled with "long hours, with no benefits, health care or overtime pay" (Kennel-Shank 42). The majority of students in urban schools today have little idea of the origins of the food they eat and the mechanisms of getting the food from the grower to their table. *So Far from the Bamboo Grove* also addresses issues of discrimination based on ethnicity, political ideology, a lack of material resources, perceived intelligence, and gender.

## **IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES**

This semester-long unit will focus on two or three autobiographical memoirs of minority children culminating in a final project of student created memoirs. This curriculum study is constructed to incorporate and support the standards and skills students must have to be successful in a high-stakes testing environment. As such, it could easily be included within the curriculum and context of the middle school grade English Language Arts classroom (130+ students) or adapted for use with a smaller, mixed grade level Enrichment class (30 students). To assist teachers in selecting and presenting literature for student use, abstracts of several autobiographies are included.

## **OVERVIEW OF LITERATURE**

Much in the same way that authors and speakers must know their audiences, teachers, too, must know their students. This includes their interests, abilities and personalities. As the focus

of this seminar was minority autobiography, an overview of the literature discussed follows to provide a small sampling of literature available. Since some of the works are not suitable for middle schoolers, overviews have been arbitrarily divided by age appropriateness.

### **Middle School Appropriate Literature**

The selected literature includes authors from varied ethnic backgrounds and historical periods. *The Circuit* and *Breaking Through* by Francisco Jimenez describe his life from earliest memory in the 1940s as the child of migrant workers through the beginning of his college education in the early 60s. Issues addressed include immigration, religion, economic and physical survival, living conditions of migrant families, bilingual education, the interdependence of family, parental and sibling relationships, and prejudice. As the continuity of the story flows without interruption or repetition, these two books could be easily taught as an extended unit. The books' format is such that chapters could be used as stand-alone stories which might be easily adapted to a literature circle format.

Elva Trevino Hart's autobiography, *Barefoot Heart: Stories of a Migrant Child*, could easily be partnered with the two books by Jimenez. The contrast of the feminine perspective with regard to family dynamics, expectations, and outcomes provides rich material for analysis. Unlike Jimenez, Hart was not allowed to work in the fields. She was the youngest child and experienced certain privileges as a result of her ranking in the birth order. At times her story is filled with the poignancy of her loneliness. Like Jimenez, she is left alone at the edge of the field while her family works. Unlike Jimenez, her only responsibility was to bring the family water. Her father's ambition that each of his children would complete high school stands in stark opposition to Jimenez's father whose dream was to keep his family working together and saw his son's desire for more education as an assault on the family's value system. Hart's book includes minor allusions and references to sexuality (beginning of menstruation).

*The House on Mango Street*, though often mistaken for autobiography, is a coming of age tale describing the life of Esperanza Cordero, set in a Latino neighborhood in Chicago. The short vignettes, though easy to read, are packed with rich imagery and language. Certainly this work deserves to be a part of the middle school canon for the beauty and sensitivity with which Cisneros addresses the issues of a young girl becoming a teenager. Topics addressed include the importance of friendship, shame, rape, gender roles, loyalty, leaving home, and personal identity.

*So Far from the Bamboo Grove* describes a Japanese family's struggle to escape Communism during World War II. In this memoir, Yoko Kawashima Watkins recounts her family's odyssey from Korea to Japan amid the havoc at the end of WWII. She is forced to flee her home in northern Korea with her older sister and her mother and is brutalized by the events she witnesses. The family becomes refugees as they escape capture by the Korean Communists and arrive in Japan just after the destruction of the atomic bomb. Although Yoko and her sister survive devastating hardships, including the unexpected death of their mother, their sharp wits and inner strength enables them to triumph. Yoko's prize-winning essay leads to their reconnection with Mr. Matsumura, a friend who aided their initial escape. At the conclusion of the memoir, Yoko and her sister are reunited with their brother, Hideyo, who also has managed to escape from Korea (Language Arts: Novel Guides, *Class Zone*). There are allusions to rape but descriptions in these scenes are not graphic.

Walter Dean Myer's autobiography, *Bad Boy*, describes the often turbulent journey of his early life. His high energy level and strong-willed personality did not help Myers embrace school norms for behavior and achievement. His seemingly conflicted interests in sports, reading, and writing coupled with his perception of what a black male teenager 'ought to be,' resulted in an internal conflict that continues to be expressed through his writing of young adult fiction. The beauty of this book is not that everything turns out all right in the end, but in its honesty. Myers

does not sugarcoat the struggle he and his family went through but demonstrates that the end result was worth the pain. This is an excellent book for students struggling to interpret societal norms in relationship to their own personal dreams and desires. Myers' rejection and reinterpretation of society's models and expectations show readers a realistic picture of the struggle and rewards of such a journey. This would be a great book to group with *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* and *Black Boy*.

*King of the Mild Frontier: An Ill-Advised Autobiography* by Chris Crutcher is an admirably well-written and very readable example of the genre. While Crutcher is not a racial minority, the experiences he recounts prove that the color of one's skin is not all that is required to make a child feel left out. His topics range from being a self-proclaimed "bawl baby," his lack of prowess at any sport, living in the shadow of his more attractive, smarter older brother, his alcoholic mother, a controlling genius father, and life in small town Washington state, all told with humor, wit, and an insight into human nature. This would be a delightful companion piece to Meyer's *Bad Boy*.

*Forty Cent Tip* is a succinct compilation of adult immigrant memoirs created from student interviews including poignant photographs accompanying each selection. The topics include unfair treatment, personal dreams, parent-child relationships, sacrifices and relationships with peers. This text could be used as the model, or mentor text, for a student-created anthology.

*Rio Grande Stories* is a compilation of 7<sup>th</sup> grade student work from Albuquerque, New Mexico. The students write, edit, and publish an eclectic collection of essays, memoirs, recipes interspersed with chapters describing the creative process. Some of the pieces are predictable, but some deal with interesting and unusual topics, like the chapter about the elderly woman who, though Mexican, is also Jewish. She has kept this secret for years, practicing the Catholic faith to avoid anti-Semitism. This book could also be used as a model for a cumulative class project.

### **High School Appropriate Literature**

Jimmy Santiago Baca's book, *A Place to Stand*, drags the reader into the pathos of his life. He describes his first memory of jail, visiting his father in the drunk tank, his mother who professed to love her children but abandoned them to grandparents so she could marry a white man and pass as white, and his experiences with juvenile detention, drugs, and illiteracy. This book is not for the faint of heart, but does have a powerful message that may be appropriate in whole or part for the more mature 8<sup>th</sup> grade or high school audience. Watch outs include the glamorization of selling drugs, sexual allusions, gang activity, brutality of prison life (including rape), and other types of violence. Selected chapters are appropriate for the classroom, but careful screening is advised.

*Hunger of Memory* by Richard Rodriguez is suitable for middle or high school audiences from a content perspective but is written in an academic style that perhaps would be more accessible to high school readers. Unlike Baca, Rodriguez undergoes seemingly little hardship in his life. He is most plagued by how he fits into the world as a highly educated Hispanic male. His descriptions of his childhood delve into some of the same issues brought up by Hart and Baca, but from a more analytical perspective. Rodriguez realized early in life that knowledge was power and strove to acquire that knowledge both as a mechanism of self-preservation and a place to hide. To his credit, he realizes that his knowledge leaves a void in his life; he does not fit with his family or within the confines of the academic world. This is the first of three books he has written about his life and stopping with this one leaves the reader with a sense of incompleteness.

*The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* by James Weldon Johnson provides ground rich with a variety of issues and themes that, though written almost a century ago, are relevant to

modern culture. Though the book is titled an autobiography, the author describes the book as fictional in the forward. Set in the post-Civil War time period, the protagonist is a mixed race boy born in the South. When his father decides to marry a Southern lady, the boy and his mother are moved north to avoid embarrassing the new Caucasian bride. It is during this time that the child discovers that he is black. After his mother's death, he decides to return to the South to attend college. This leads to a series of experiences that ultimately cause him to determine the best course is to renounce his blackness, return to the North and live as white. References to mild sexuality, language, and racial prejudice may make this book more appropriate for older students.

Like Johnson's autobiography, Richard Wright's *Black Boy* describes life in the Jim Crow South and his subsequent journey to the North. The introduction describes the book as a "classic example of American autobiography" and a "subtly crafted narrative of a young man's coming of age" (xi). His experiences of discrimination and classicism within his race and by other races are honestly documented. Unlike Johnson, Wright never tries to live as a white man. Rather, he struggles to gain acceptance for what he is – a black man with a gift for writing and truth telling. This book includes language and references to sexuality that would be more appropriate for high school students.

*Catfish and Mandala* by Andrew X. Pham details his desire to return to Vietnam as an adult. He begins this account by describing his life in America and the many ways he experiences prejudice. He and his family arrived from Vietnam when Pham was ten in 1977. His decision to tour Vietnam on a bicycle twenty years later brings him close to a culture and family members he does not know. Woven throughout the story of his journey are insights into his family secrets, the sister who commits suicide, the history of his family's journey to the United States, his struggles with his identity, etc. While Pham's prose is accessible to middle school readers, the mature themes in this book including transgender surgery, homosexuality, suicide, prostitution, language, drinking, and drug use, warrant careful evaluation.

## **OVERVIEW OF STRATEGIES**

The teaching of this unit should begin with some informal polling of the class to determine their interests and life experiences. For a more ethnically homogeneous class, the focus of the unit would shift to address the demographic and experience of the group. Once students' interest and background have been established, selection of appropriate literature is the next step. There are many resources available on-line; students may want to nominate books that interest them, or the teacher may choose a selection of titles for group choice. This polling could take the form of a written instrument (see Appendix A), whole class discussion, or small group interviews. The structure and teaching methods for this unit can be tailored to provide the best instructional support for each particular student group. Some of the options include: whole class study of selected works to establish common themes and elements; using literature circles to facilitate readings and discussion of short works of literature that are of interest to a specific group of students; individual (or small group) independent study and research of a specific author or piece of literature culminating in a student presentation; or creation of student autobiographical stories for inclusion in a class anthology.

For those less familiar with literature circles in the classroom, one could compare the strategy to book clubs, recently popularized by Oprah Winfrey (Daniels 4). Most book clubs agree to read a specific piece of literature based on mutual interest, and then gather to discuss the literature. In the classroom, a small group of students (five is a good group size) agree to study the same literature based on their interests. Using basic guidelines regarding roles and responsibilities, students form a semi-autonomous accountability group for the period of time needed to complete their study. The students take responsibility for their learning and hold their group mates accountable for meeting the agreed to deadlines. The strategy takes the teacher out of the role of

expert and empowers each student to become an expert within the context of the group. However, it can be adapted to incorporate varying degrees of teacher interaction, support, and modeling.

There are many excellent resources to help effectively implement this strategy. Harvey Daniels, dubbed the unofficial “Father of Literature Circles,” has compiled a couple of great texts, *Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in Books Clubs and Reading Groups* and *Mini Lessons for Literature Circles* co-authored with Nancy Steineke. *Making Literature Circles Come Alive* by Amy Hamra provides insight into development of higher level thinking skills and helping students understand the application of those skills as they develop their own questioning strategies within the context of literature circles. There are several websites geared specifically toward literature circle resources and [http://www.studyguide.org/lit\\_circles\\_high\\_school.htm](http://www.studyguide.org/lit_circles_high_school.htm) is an example of a comprehensive one.

## **LESSON PLANS**

The overall scope and objective of this unit includes reading, comprehending, and empowering students to make connections to their lives through the use of the literature circle model. Students will demonstrate their success in mastering the techniques by creating a student anthology of memoir and biography. Prior to beginning the unit, a selection of texts should be reviewed and compiled by the teacher for inclusion in the unit. Assume that three to five different titles will be needed based on a group size of four to five students. Texts could be selected based on a common theme or experience, like migrant farm worker children, the impact of racism, ethnic groups, poverty, affect of gangs, or the effects of war. Or the decision may be made to simply focus the study on autobiography as a genre.

### **Lesson One – Establishing Groups and Building Background**

Regardless of the specific literature selected for study, it is critical that students start with some background knowledge of the setting and historical context. For example, it is doubtful that many middle school students will have an understanding of migrant worker life in the 1950s in California or the political situation and prejudices that caused the family in *So Far From the Bamboo Grove* to flee for their lives.

#### ***Materials***

- A timer (watch, clock, etc.)
- Access to computer lab with Internet access and/or library facilities
- Copies of the various texts selected
- Chart paper and markers
- Group folders or notebooks for recording information

#### ***Objectives***

With the idea of building small group communities focused on independent research and learning, within their assigned groups, students will develop research topics based on their understanding of the selected texts, assign research roles and responsibilities, complete and share the research with their group members.

#### ***Activity One***

Once the material has been selected it is important that the educator have a working knowledge of the texts. One of the preparatory activities will include book talking the available selections to the class so that students can make an informed choice. I like to describe “book talk” as the equivalent of a movie trailer advertising the book. The purpose is to catch the reader’s interest without giving away too many details of the plot and resolution. A good book talk would include



enough background information about the characters, their relationship, the setting, and one or two exciting events. It may be appropriate to read a short selection from the book that is particularly exciting. Beers points out that students will “be less reluctant to read a book” if the first chapter or two has been read aloud (291). Pointing out any unusual features of the text that you found interesting would also be helpful to include. For example, if using *The Circuit*, I would point out that the chapters are fairly short and that the book is not very long. This could provide hope to a less proficient reader who finds the thought of a thick book overwhelming. Once book talks have been completed, pass around copies of the books for students to handle. As a part of this process you will be asking them to list their top three choices in order of preference (see Appendix B for an example). Another sample ballot format is found in *Mini-Lessons for Literature Circles* which lists the book choices and asks students to rank their top three selections (110). This information will be used to establish groups with consideration made for student preferences and abilities.

**Activity Two - Written Discussion Ice-Breaker (or Writing in the Round)**

[http://www.studyguide.org/lit\\_circles\\_high\\_school.htm](http://www.studyguide.org/lit_circles_high_school.htm)

Students will be placed in assigned groups and copies of the selected autobiography will be distributed. Each student will need a piece of paper and a writing implement for this activity, which also requires a timer and teacher monitoring to make sure that students are writing and not discussing. Instead of small group verbal discussions where it is easy for dominant personalities to rule, each group will conduct a discussion about their current knowledge of the subject matter in writing. Students will be given a sentence starter such as “Some of the things I know about this topic are...” or “I really want to understand \_\_\_\_\_ about this person’s life.” Each student will write for 1-2 minutes and at the end of the time, will pass their papers to the right. The student will silently read what their classmate has written and then respond in writing, adding their own opinions, questions, and observations. At the end of the specified period of time, papers are passed again and the activity is repeated until the paper returns to the original author. Only at this point may students speak to each other about the topic. From the written discussion, students will propose, discuss, establish consensus on three research topics and decide the most appropriate research methods (use of the Internet, other printed material, personal interview, etc.). Each group will determine the amount of time needed for research and individuals will be responsible for reporting their findings to the group for inclusion in the final presentation over the text.

**Activity Three**

Once research topics have been established, students will be responsible for conducting the research and documenting their findings. Groups may decide to work with partners for larger research topics. You may want groups to submit a research proposal including the topics to be researched and who will be accountable for the information. (See Appendix C for a sample research proposal document).

**Lesson Two**

Now that students are in small groups and have engaged in research to establish background, it is important to clearly establish the roles and responsibilities that ensure the functionality of the book club as the material is read. One of our primary goals as teachers is to foster and develop independent learners who are willing to take the initiative to answer their own questions. There is much flexibility in the organization of each book group. Students may choose to rotate the roles and responsibilities throughout the group; they may choose to have specific students fulfill a role throughout the course of the study, or teachers may appoint students to specific roles. The critical objective is that students take responsibility for their own learning.

Daniels' *Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in Book Clubs and Reading Groups* describes four approaches to literature circle organization, ranging from jumping to reading the selected texts, starting with a whole class read selection, beginning with a short story to practice skills, and other variations based on student age and background (57-75). Given the variety of grade and skill levels likely to be encountered in the typical enrichment class, I'd suggest beginning with a whole class read short story, perhaps something from Gary Soto's collection of short stories, *Baseball in April*.

One easily developed skill that will benefit readers throughout their lives is making connections to what they read. Chances are students are already doing this without realizing it. However, for less proficient readers it is helpful to formally name and demonstrate the skills that they are expected to grasp. According to Beers, these strategies include "clarifying, comparing and contrasting, connecting to prior experiences, making inferences (including generalizing and drawing conclusions), predicting, questioning the text, recognizing the author's purpose, seeing causal relationships, summarizing, and visualizing" (41). While this skill set seems daunting, it includes those abilities that good students utilize as second nature. Beers suggests that instruction begin by focusing on two or three key strategies which are explicitly modeled through direct instruction, first explaining the specific skills, and then demonstrating using a think aloud strategy (42).

### **Materials**

- Class set of selected short story
- Role sheets for each group
- Post-it notes for each student
- Selected autobiographies for group use

### **Objective**

The fundamental objectives for this lesson include introduction, modeling, and practicing the roles in a literature circle. Students will become familiar with reader's response journaling techniques, develop a list of roles and responsibilities, establish a timeline, and begin reading the selected texts.

### **Activity One**

As students begin making connections to literature, it is important to have a system of documentation. One such system is the reading response journal. Whether notes are recorded in a formal journal or scribbled on post-it notes, connections need to be captured. After introducing the topic of reading response journals, establish prior knowledge by informally polling the class. Has anyone ever used a response journal? What kinds of information do you think are important to write down? List responses on board or overhead for student reference. According to Jenny Cornbleet in Daniel's text, the list could include the following:

- |                                |                                  |
|--------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| your connections               | questions about the story        |
| opinions                       | a drawing or sketch of the scene |
| criticism                      | something it reminds you of      |
| questions for the author. (62) |                                  |

You may choose to model this activity using a "think aloud" strategy, which involves reading a portion of a text out loud and verbally modeling the thought process of the specific skills being demonstrated. This is a good opportunity to explain the meaning of the word *rhetorical* and that the questions and comments that you make while reading are rhetorical observations that do not have or need an answer at this point in the lesson. Otherwise you might find your instruction side-tracked as you attempt to respond to the students' comments to your observations. In

addition to the verbal modeling, make sure that the observations are also captured in writing to be used as the beginning of the reading response journal.

Students will practice these strategies as they read the selected short story or first few pages of their group's text. One of the challenges faced in group reading is the varying speeds with which students read. One technique that may be helpful is timed reading. Students will read for a specified period of time, usually three to five minutes, and at the end of that time will stop reading where they are and have a brief discussion with a partner about what they have both read, discussing their questions, connections, predictions, etc. In other words, students will verbalize their reading response journal. At the end of the two to three minute discussion period, students will record their observations in their reading response journals and resume independent reading.

### ***Activity Two***

Establishing formal roles and responsibilities within the structure of the literature circle will help ensure equal participation among group members (even those shy voices who feel they have nothing to contribute) and helps to hold students accountable for their individual and group commitment. Daniels recommends role sheets as an introductory tool to get the groups comfortable and help embed the level of reading and thinking skills desired:

<u>Role</u>	<u>Reading Strategy</u>
Discussion Director	asking questions
Connector	making connections
Illustrator	visualizing
Vocabulary Enricher	noticing author's craft
Literary Luminary	determining importance. ( <i>Mini-Lessons 75</i> )

If the role titles are too difficult to explain without adding unneeded complication to the process, then simplify by providing a brief job description. Students will rotate through the roles, moving to a different role each class period so that their competence increases. It is important to note that while one individual has primary responsibility, the discussion is collaborative. Groups may want to self-assign or volunteer for roles initially. It is important that all students understand they are responsible for contributing to the group discussions regardless of the specific role they are currently assigned.

Once roles have been assigned, then students will begin reading their selected autobiography. Time for silent reading will need to be closely monitored for productivity while individuals build stamina for sustained silent reading. At some point, early in the process, groups will need to put together a schedule for each day's readings. It will be part of the groups' responsibilities to maintain and adhere to the schedule. Perhaps schedules could be posted in a central classroom location.

Now that students are happily and busily reading, the role of the instructional leader is to monitor, provide feedback, guidance, and participate in discussions with each group.

### **Lesson Three – Culminating Project**

The final project for this unit is the creation of a student anthology, which demonstrates the students' ability to make connections to their lives and their family members or friends. You may recall how proud you felt to have your work placed in a place of recognition when you were a student. It is hoped that the same sense of empowerment will provide a lasting impact on students who might not consider themselves to be proficient readers and/or writers.

Two mentor texts are suggested for appraisal prior to beginning the writing. The structure of the project lends itself to many variations in grouping. For example, each literature circle group could assume responsibility for a specific segment of the anthology. As the instructional leader

of the classroom, you may elect to hold the title of Editor-in-Chief, but could assign individuals to other key roles as determined by the class.

### ***Objective***

Students will plan, develop, create, write, and publish a class anthology of student work.

### ***Materials***

- Class set of *Rio Grande Stories*
- Computer access with Internet and word processing software
- Copies of immigrant stories from *Forty-Cent Tip*
- Computer lab access for research and word processing

### ***Activity One – Evaluating Mentor Texts***

Introduce the two books *Forty-Cent Tip* and *Rio Grande Stories* which are similar, yet very different. Both are student anthologies of memoir and biography. *Forty Cent Tip* was written by high school students who had recently immigrated to the United States. Their assignment was to interview other adult immigrants using a set of questions and create a 2-3 page memoir with photographs. Several of the vignettes are available for downloading from the WhatKidsCanDo website. It might be helpful to print a few of these for student examples. *Rio Grande Stories* is also a student created product by 7<sup>th</sup> graders in Albuquerque, New Mexico. The stories are not all biographical but topics range from personal experience to recipes and memories of ethnic food.

Allow students to carefully evaluate and analyze the structure and content of both books, identifying the perceived positive aspects of each work (in might be helpful to have students work in groups with each book and then trade to evaluate the other book). Conduct a whole class discussion around each book focusing on what works well in each book and aspects of the books that students don't think work so well. Make a list of the characteristics for future reference.

### ***Activity Two – Plan and Write***

Assign the class project to create an anthology or collection of student written pieces. You might decide to have the class develop job descriptions for and assign positions of content editor (could be the teacher), cover design, and copy editor (proofreader). Students will create a book plan or preliminary table of contents and format requirements (margins, font type and size, etc.). Some of the ideas to consider (in addition to those brought up in class brainstorming) might include:

1. Will poetry be included?
2. Are photographs or illustrations for each piece required or optional?
3. Will the book focus around a theme (like new beginnings)?
4. How long will each piece of writing need to be?
5. When are rough drafts due?
6. Is typing required or are neatly written hard copies acceptable?

Groups will generate a short list of proposed topics for submission to the editor (teacher). Once topics are approved, a research schedule or project timeline will be created. Groups will also need to develop a set of interview questions if their subject involves telling someone else's story. Students will be responsible for checking in with the editor at regular intervals for work in progress review and feedback. You may want to set up a peer review committee or editorial board for more frequent checks.

Part of the overall assessment for the project includes how well the group met the agreed to dates, their individual and group work ethic, collaborative efforts, and accountability. In addition to teacher-generated evaluation, allow students the opportunity to reflect and assess their individual contributions and the efforts of their group members.

### ***Activity Three – Publish and Celebrate***

Upon completion of editing, students will compile the anthology into a book form. This could be as simple as printed copies bound into a folder or binder. Regardless of the format of the finished product, each student should receive a copy and celebrate the accomplishment with more than a pat on the back and a good grade. Some options include scheduling some time for the school principal to visit the class and listen to student readings from the anthology or holding a reception during class time (or after school) for parents and other faculty members to acknowledge the project. The class may elect to present a signed copy to the school library for display. If there is a school newspaper, ask to have an article about the project included in the next issue or invite other local newspapers to cover the reception. This could be a great way to generate positive publicity for the school and the students.

**APPENDIX A**

Sample Student Interest Questionnaire

1. Where were you born?
2. How long have you lived in Houston?
3. Where were your parents born?
4. Where do your grandparents live?
5. How many brothers and sisters do you have?
6. What was the last movie that you enjoyed? What was your favorite part?
7. What was the last book that you read for pleasure?
8. Describe a moment in your life when you were really proud or pleased with something you accomplished.
9. Describe a moment that you found really disappointing.
10. List two topics that you would like to learn more about. This could be a hobby, sport, musical group, school subject, etc.

**APPENDIX B**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Class Period: \_\_\_\_\_

The books I am most interested in reading include:

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

**APPENDIX C**

Research Proposal

Group Members: \_\_\_\_\_

Book title: \_\_\_\_\_

<u>Research Topic</u>	<u>Person(s) Responsible</u>
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

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### Supplemental Resources

#### **Student Books** (Annotation placed in body of paper)

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<[http://www.studyguide.org/lit\\_circles\\_high\\_school.htm](http://www.studyguide.org/lit_circles_high_school.htm)>. This site gives background and guidance for the writing activity in lesson one.

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Provides links to a variety of literature circle resources by grade level, research topics, extension ideas, etc.