

Chasing the Elusive Adolescent “I”: Through the Reading and Writing of Autobiographies

Robin Bishop Johnson
Edison Middle School

INTRODUCTION

All my life I had been looking for something, and everywhere I turned, someone tried to tell me what it was. I accepted their answers too, though they were often in contradiction and even self-contradictory. I was naïve. I was looking for myself and asking everyone except myself questions which I, and only I could answer (Ralph Ellison, in Troupe and Schulte, 163).

This poignant quote from Ralph Ellison’s book *Invisible Man* summarizes the observations I have of this passage in the time we call “life.” It appears that we are all looking for something. This something we are looking for is ourselves, but alas this trip called life is riddled with obstacles and detours that keep us from finding the true “self.” People and society are constantly imposing a view of what we “should” do and who you “should” be. It takes grand and vigilant effort to wade through the “shouldisms” and plot a course to the self that is uniquely our own. A quote by e.e. cummings says this best:

To be nobody-but-yourself – in a world which is doing its best, night and day, to make you everybody else – means to fight the hardest battle which any human being can fight; and never stop fighting.

As we struggle day to day in this passage of time called life, we often find a point when we look in the mirror and don’t even recognize the person staring back at us, or if we do recognize the person, we may not like what the person has become. All sooner or later will arrive at this place in some shape or form because this looking for the self is a life-long event.

Life events such as divorce, death, or job loss will certainly force you to look at self. When a life event occurs, it will toss and tumble you from your comfort zone and you will be forced to confront chaos. In the chaos the search for self will resonate. This search for self is universal and continuous whether one is self-aware or not. It may be going on without awareness, because life is not static. One is always growing. One is always evaluating and reassessing one’s decisions. One continues to revise one’s decisions, or at the very least one ought to try. This search for self is a constant companion in life.

Learning about oneself is a lifelong process which begins in earnest in the middle school when the student is an adolescent. Adolescence is the period of one’s life when the “I” exists in a state of confusion; and simultaneously so strong and so necessary is the desire to pull away from the nest. The primary family becomes less influential and the peers apply their pressure. Questions abound. Who am I? Where do I belong? Why do I feel this way? Where do I fit into the world? Where am I going? Where do I want to go? How am I going to get there? To speak of a “normal” adolescent seems to be an elusive concept, because the “I” is undergoing a complete restructuring. Even the question of what is normal is a question for the adolescent in

the search for self. So how does one assist adolescents in this period of intense self-examination and help them with self-understanding and possibly assist in the definition or clarification of the “I.”

Finding the elusive “Who am I?” is possible through the process of reading and writing memoirs (and autobiographies). Writing about oneself, whether in the daily exercise of journaling or by capturing a moment in a more lengthy narrative piece, will assist the student in accessing a stronger sense of self. This stronger sense of self perhaps will help students have a greater ability to think for themselves and perhaps lead to less of a need to bend to the power of the almighty peer group. Connecting with other individuals in the reading of their memoir (and autobiography) will give them momentary glimpses into another’s life and in doing so perhaps have the students will recognize a bit of themselves, or perhaps grow more tolerant to other humans and gain a broader insight into the human condition.

As a teacher of middle school students, this search for self is so obvious and something a teacher encounters on a daily basis. One minute a young man has a crew haircut, wears sport logo shirts, and carries soccer magazines in his backpack to be brought out anytime there is a free time. The next moment he is growing his hair long, painting his nails with black nail coloring, and the only suitable color choice for his clothing is black. He has discovered rock and roll and is taking guitar lessons. Has something really changed about the boy other than his exterior? He is simply trying on different personalities to see which one fits.

As adults, whether teacher or parent, we sometimes forget our own forays into different exteriors in search of one that matches the interior. Just take a moment and go look at your own middle school or high school yearbooks and get a good chuckle. The hair, the clothes, the interests, is that still how you dress, look, or feel now?

Stated more eloquently is Linda Atwell’s description of middle school children from her book *In the Middle*:

Middle school students shuttle back and forth between naïveté and world-weariness. They shuttle back and forth between everything. They are self-confident and self-doubting; they think I’m funny and they think I’m pathetic; they take responsibility for the younger kids at our morning assembly, then run them over on the soccer field at recess. They never know—and I never know—what they’ll be... (56).

As a teacher, I am on the frontline of this “shuttle.” Empathy and understanding to these events is critical in helping the student through this experience. Sometimes the direction is toward a self-destructive path (drugs, sex, violence, gangs). The “aware” teacher can participate in the guidance necessary for the student by “seeing” them, by directing them into some self-evaluation that might help the student see themselves. Using the classroom to provide tools to increase a student’s ability toward self-evaluation can be critical at this beginning process of the life-long search for “self.”

The purpose of this curriculum unit is three-fold. To encourage introspection and a ritualistic method of recording their individual ideas, I will use journal writing on a frequent basis. This will be coupled with the reading of excerpts from memoirs (and autobiographies), which will be chosen to help focus students on their own writing of autobiographical stories that can cumulate into a memory book. The focus of the reading selections and the student’s autobiographical writings will deal with specific themes that connect with the self, connect with the family, and connect with the community. Through these three activities, tools can be provided for answering the age-old question “Who am I?, Where do I come from?, and Who do I want to be?”

UNIT BACKGROUND

In today's vernacular, the terms memoir and autobiography seem to be used interchangeably. Even while writing the introduction, I became confused about which term was appropriate for the curriculum unit I want to design. I am still confused. Even though I read this genre on a regular basis, I had never sat down and analyzed the difference. What exactly is a memoir and what is an autobiography? Is there really a difference?

Turning to the dictionary, autobiography is defined as the story of a person's life written by himself (Webster 31), whereas a memoir is defined as a short biographical sketch, reminiscences (Webster 234). The two definitions only add to my own confusion, so I turn to *Wikipedia*, an internet encyclopedia and dictionary to help decipher the differences. According to *Wikipedia*:

A memoir is slightly different from an autobiography. Traditionally, an autobiography focuses on the "life and times" of the character, while a memoir has a narrower, more intimate focus on his or her memories, feelings and emotions. ("Autobiography")

Memoirs have often been written by politician or military leaders as a way to record and publish an account of their public exploits. In the eighteenth century, "scandalous memoirs" were written (mostly anonymously) by prostitutes or libertines: these were widely read in France for their juicy gossip. But memoir has another meaning too. The pagan rhetor Libanius framed his life memoir as one of his orations, not the public kind, but the literary kind that would be read aloud in the privacy of one's study. This kind of memoir refers to the idea in ancient Greece and Rome that memoirs were like "memos," pieces of unfinished and unpublished writing which a writer might use as a memory aid to make a more finished document later on. In more recent times, memoirs are also life stories which can be about the writer and about another person at the same time. ("Memoir")

Compare this to what *Wikipedia* says about the autobiography:

An autobiography (from the Greek *auton*, 'self,' *bios*, 'life' and *graphein* 'write') is a biography written by the subject or composed conjointly with a collaborative writer (styled "as told to" or "with"). The terms dates from the late eighteenth century, but the form is much older. ("Autobiography")

When teaching the students about the genre of autobiography or memoir, I must be able to explain the differences specifically. I must be able to make the student understand exactly what the differences are. I must know the answer to this before I use the literary genre in class. My students do not like it if I can not explain exactly "HOW" they are different.

At this point I turn to Gore Vidal to help clarify the difference. In his memoir *Palimpsest*, he writes that "a memoir is how one remembers one's own life, while an autobiography is history, requiring research, dates, facts double-checked" (5).

I am still confused, but realized after reading his memoir, it had more to do with his recording of his personal observations and experiences within specific historical events. This led me to look back at other memoirs I have read. It seems that the autobiography and the memoir are both a history, or record composed from personal observations and experience, but what makes a memoir different from an autobiography is chiefly in the degree of emphasis on external events. The writer of the memoir seems to have a need to interpret these external events and use them to make sense of their life.

Again it is confusing because in today's vernacular, the terms are used interchangeably, and unless you are a student of literature, these differences would be very confusing. My confusion

has been confirmed because *Wikipedia* states that the term “memoir” has begun to replace “autobiography” in its popular use:

Until the last 20 years or so few people without some degree of fame tried to write and publish a memoir. But with the critical and commercial success in the United States of such memoirs as *Angela’s Ashes* and *The Color of Water*, more and more people have been encouraged to try their hand at this genre. Also recently, several American professional writers such as David Sedaris, Augusten Burroughs and Dave Eggers have become famous almost solely for writing interesting or amusing memoirs (“Memoir”).

Now with this clarification of the difference in the terminology, are you still confused? I will use the words interchangeably as I further explore the genre.

Autobiography seems to have always been considered a “sort of second-class literary undertaking, slightly indulgent, requiring no skill other than an endless fascination with yourself” (Bauer 120). There also seem to be some misguided ideas that the autobiography is artless:

Most autobiographies put down the events in their lives without consulting experts or discussing theories of autobiographical composition...but like novels, most autobiographies have plots: beginnings, middles, and the ends...While novelists are aware of themselves as craftsmen (and women), autobiographies are often “accidental writers” who would never consider themselves professionals. But the artlessness of the autobiography is an illusion. Writers of autobiography do use technique. Not only do they restructure the past so that it brings meaning to the present, but they follow certain conventions as they retell their stories. They may do both unconsciously – but this is still craft. (Bauer 119)

During the fifties, a cluster of books and articles suggested that the autobiography was in no way the simple, straightforward activity it had seemed. Rather, the autobiographer, as Roy Pascal wrote in 1960, “half discovers, half creates a deeper design and truth than adherence to historical and factual truth could ever make claim to” (Pascal 61-83).

The turning of a life into a story is not as straightforward as it might seem. There has been, since humans have possessed written language and have had a sense of the passage of time, the keeping of diaries and journals where one might jot down details of daily life. This does not make an autobiography. A diarist notes the events of each day, without bothering to fix them into an overall pattern. But the biographer must put his or her life into some order, explaining thoughts and events that appear important only in hindsight. This hindsight is shaped by the overall purpose that the biographer has chosen for his or her life. “So the autobiographer’s backward gaze doesn’t just tell events – it sees them as part of a design that exists only because the writer has decided that one explanation (and no other) makes sense of his life” (Bauer 114-115).

The first writer to tell the story of his life was Augustine, born in North Africa at the end of the Roman Empire. He is the first autobiographer because he chooses a meaning for his life and arranges the events of his life to reflect this meaning. Augustine becomes a follower of God.

In Richard Rodriguez’s autobiography, *Hunger for Memory*, we find this same arranging of events of his life to reflect meaning. Richard Rodriguez, growing up in California, the child of illegal immigrants from Mexico, speaks English at his Sacramento elementary school, but Spanish in private and at home. He explains his use of Spanish in private and in his home. “These sounds said....*I am addressing you in words, I never use with los gringos. I recognize you as someone special, like no one outside. You belong with us, In the family*” (Rodriquez 16). Then it is suggested by his teachers that he needs more practice in English, his parents insist that he use English at home as well. His memory of this:

One Saturday morning, I entered the kitchen where my parents were talking in Spanish. I did not realize they were talking in Spanish, however, until, at the moment they saw me, I heard their voices change to speak *English*. Those *gringo* sounds they uttered startled me. Pushed me away. In that moment of trivial misunderstanding and profound insight, I felt my throat twisted by unsounded grief. I turned quickly and left the room... Again and again in the days following, increasingly angry, I felt obliged to hear my mother and father: "Speak to us *en inglés*." (*Speak*.) Only then did I determine to learn classroom English. Weeks after, it happened: One day in school, I raised my hand to volunteer an answer. I spoke out in a loud voice. And I did not think it remarkable when the entire class understood. That day, I moved very far from the disadvantaged child I had been only days earlier. The belief, the calming assurance that I belonged in public, had at last taken hold. (Rodriguez 21-22)

Did these events happen just as Rodriguez described them? Or course not. The grown man's awareness is layered over the child's memory at every point. The story in the kitchen is not an objective reconstruction of the past. The child was angry; only the adult knows that this was a "moment of trivial misunderstanding and profound insight." Only the mature Rodriguez is able to see the connection between the question and the brief exchange in the kitchen the weeks before. Rodriguez sees the story of his life as the story of his entrance into American life. "I turn to consider the boy I once was," he writes, "in order, finally, to describe the man I am now. I remember what was so grievously lost to define what was necessarily gained" (Rodriguez, 6). Rodriguez in describing events in the kitchen is making a point and marshalling his plot points so that they lead to a climactic interpretation. The event in the kitchen would have assumed another meaning entirely if he had decided that his life was about the emergence of his sexuality or the development of a great creative talent. The autobiographer chooses a meaning for their life and arranges the events of their life to reflect this meaning. For Rodriguez it was becoming an American; for Augustine it was his becoming a follower of God (Bauer 115-116).

Autobiographical criticism has again gained steam, particularly in light of the recent discussion of the authenticity of every event written by the autobiographer. This criticism has been lurking in the literary background for some time, but was brought to the forefront recently with the criticism of the author James Frey and his book *A Million Little Pieces*, which tells the story of a 23-year old alcoholic and drug abuser who copes with rehabilitation in the Twelve-Step oriented treatment center. Released to wide acclaim in April 2003, the book has garnered recent international attention after it was discovered that the book contained outright fabrications, and was not, as originally believed, a factual memoir. It is now being referred to as a fictionalized memoir, a new oxymoron for our vocabulary.

This whole debate is not new, so what is the big deal! Academics have always questioned the line between fact and imagination, and have often pointed out that a "fact," particularly in autobiography, is a slippery object. These precepts resonant in Susan Bauer's book, *The Well-Educated Mind: A Guide to the Classical Education You Never Had*:

Autobiography allows a writer to recreate his own life, to read meaning back into past events, to give shape and sense to what has been meaningless...you read autobiography to find out what it's like to see the world from another point of view, from inside the skin of another person. If the point is vividly drawn, so that you *understand* life as a woman, or an ex-slave or a second-generation Mexican immigrant, does it really matter whether the events are "accurate"? (123-124)

These same precepts are also the guiding desire I have with this curriculum unit: to make sense out of one's own experience, to understand and find meaning in past events, to grow

comfortable inside one's own skin by reading others' experiences, and to get some understanding of the human condition as experienced within the skin of another.

Teaching writing is an intricate endeavor. Textbooks attempt to give students techniques for organization as well as proper form for specific types of writing, i.e. persuasive, narrative, etc. A lesson may offer detailed charts as a method of organization and give examples of using such charts to help format their thoughts and writing. It works well with student writers so long as they are using the book's ideas. When it is the students' turn to originate, then the difficulty arises. What good is a chart if the student has difficulty deciding on the initial idea? The student cannot organize what the student does not have (Velardi).

So how do you get the student to write? Overcoming the uncomfortable situation of where ideas come from, the memoir/autobiography is a natural approach.

Authors experienced in adolescents and in writing speak to the difficulty in getting students to write. Leo Ruth in his article, "Reading Children's Writing," says that children must have the opportunity to share their own life experiences, to write about personal knowledge, and to recognize themselves as the author if they are to develop their own thinking ability. To their creativity going, teach them to write what they know. In *One Writer's Beginnings*, Eudora Welty states that her best writing is based on real life events and the things she knows best. She believed that writers "must have a real experience for the works to have power."

But the writing I desire from students is more than a personal narrative. I do not want them to just write about what happened to them or how they feel about something. I had learned not to make this mistake when teaching writing by reading Nancy Atwell's book, *In the Middle: New Understandings about Writing, Reading, and Learning*. She states that the "personal-experience narrative provided a welcome jump-off point for writers in the early days of the writing workshop." She would ask her students to write about events from their lives and to measure their drafts against reality – or, at least, memory. She taught revision as the process of changing a narrative to reflect ever more accurate versions of the events a writer had experience. But she soon found her students sapped of their pleasure in writing. They grew bored telling what happened to them and bored listening to stories about other kids' experiences. She soon began to introduce a new genre to her students, because the "personal narrative began to feel mechanical...it gave me a scaffold to lean against as I began to learn about the craft of writing and how to teach it to kids" (370-371). This new genre was the memoir:

I wrote memoirs in search of the genre and my own past; I wrote them to try to open windows into my life. These were not personal experience narrative about how I did this, then I did that, and it was all so much fun. In memoir I discovered a genre that helps me live my life. (372)

Her words, "helps me live my life," is the very reason the reading and writing of memoir/autobiographies is an appropriate approach to helping the adolescent chase their "elusive I." She further supports the genre as useful and appropriate in writing workshops by stating:

Memoir is how writers look for the past and make sense of it. We figure out who we are, who we have become, and what it means to us and to the lives of others. A memoir puts the events of a life in perspective for the writer and for those who read it. It is a way to validate to others the events of our lives – our choices, perspectives, decision, responses...Memoir recognizes and explores moments on the way to growing up and becoming oneself, the good moments and the bad ones. It distills the essence of an experience through what a writer includes and, more importantly, through what a writer excludes. Memoir celebrates people and places no one else has ever heard of. And memoir allows us to discover and tell our own truths as writers." (372)

Writing the memoir is not an easy task according to Atwell; her comments reinforce earlier discussion of the misguided ideas that the memoir is artless by Bauer. Atwell states:

Memoir is not autobiography, not a diary or chronicle of one's days; it is an art. Like fiction, it's fashioned deliberately. *Walden* may read like this great, cool life that unwinds naturally as literature, but Thoreau wrote seven drafts of *Walden* over eight years. The possibilities of the genre lie in how a memoirist decides to fashion a portion of his or her life. (392)

Just as discussed earlier when I referenced Bauer and her comparison of Augustine's *Confessions* and Richard Rodriguez's *Hunger for Memory*, and how both writers looked to the past and tried to make sense of it, we find Atwell making the same point. Each writer chose a meaning for their life, for Augustine it was his becoming a follower of God, for Rodriguez it was become an American.

This same logic could be used in the discussion of one of the book used in the seminar. Andrew X. Pham, in his book *Catfish and Mandala*, is clearly a writer trying to take the moments of his life and give them perspective. The author, Andrew Pham, left Vietnam as a child in a leaking boat and returned twenty years later as a grown man on a bicycle. "It started out originally as a travelogue of my trip back to Vietnam, but travelogues don't allow the author to put in his own thoughts and say why he went on the trip in the first place. So I decided to make it a larger work" (Pham in Allen-Taylor article). Without knowing, I suspect, Pham needed to make sense of things since his journey began shortly after the death of a sibling. What resulted from his physical journey to Vietnam was an odyssey into his own psyche. By revealing the secrets of his family past, he finds in himself what I am sure was an unknown need in him at the beginning of his trip: reconciliation through understanding—reconciliation with the family and their secrets, with the difficult bridge of being Vietnamese and American, and with the death of a sibling—seems to be evident by the journey and book's end. In his own journey for this reconciliation with understanding, it seems that he "also opens a doorway to healing the great wounds in the souls of all those people touched in one way or another by the war in Vietnam" (Allen-Taylor). The wounds of that war have entangled two countries, America and Vietnam, for the last forty years, and that wound still resonates for many, whether American or Vietnamese.

Pham, in the writing of his memoir, finds and defines himself by the shaping of the events he chose to write about and the choice to write about the painful family secrets. By not writing a travelogue, but a memoir, Pham achieved the goal of the genre, which is that the "memoir allows us to discover and tell our own truths as writers" (Atwell 372). For the reader of this memoir, the other goal of the genre was achieved. "You read autobiography to find out what it's like to see the world from another point of view, from inside the skin of another person..." and "if the point is vividly drawn...you *understand* life" (Bauer 123-124).

Life as a saint, life as a second-generation Mexican, life as a Viet-kieu searching for reconciliation, or life as a man who felt the need to record the days lived beside a pond—all these provide readers moments of being "inside the skin of another." Through the reading of those memoirs, perhaps the reader will garner glimpses into their own self, the "elusive I" that they chase.

Reiterating, a tool to help the adolescent student find their "elusive I" is the reading and writing of memoir (and autobiographies). But, it must be done jointly, for one without the other is not as effective. Reading alone is not the complete tool. One must have the student write to provide meaning. It is through the process of writing that the adolescent student is able to gain value from one's life experiences whether the knowledge of these experiences is gained through reading about them or by living them personally. It is the analysis, synthesis, and organization of thoughts that leads to insight.

If the academic goals are for students to increase their writing skills, as well as teach them to look at themselves and their experiences, then students must write. For those who aren't so keen on this "touchy feeling psychobabble" and wish only to increase the student's writing skills as clearly mandated by curriculums across the nation, I offer this antidote. Writing about themselves can provide students a tool for finding the "elusive I." In order to write a memoir, what is needed is simply good writing skills. This is so clearly explained by Atwell:

Memoir calls for strong language; for metaphors and similes; for characters in action and a good story; for problems and themes; for humor and voice; for rich specifics; for rhythm and repetition; for the telling detail. Bottom line, memoir calls for selection: the writer edits his or her life for a reader. (393)

INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

The time-frame for teaching the curriculum unit will be the entire year. Since I am a teacher in the Houston Independent School District, I have designed it in a way that it can be used in conjunction with our mandated curriculum Project CLEAR and model lessons. For those not within the bounds of HISD, this curriculum unit uses all aspects of the literacy model for modern secondary schools: listening, speaking, viewing, representing, and analysis.

The curriculum unit has three components: journaling, the reading of auto-biographical texts, and the writing of autobiographical texts, all of which will be interwoven within the daily activities of the student, so that it is a continuous activity. If time allows, it is possible to incorporate into the curriculum unit an end-product consisting of a "memory book" which will hold excerpts of the journaling activities and accumulations of the specific larger writing projects, all or some based on the student's decision.

The first grading period (for me six weeks) will be focused on developing the habit of journaling for the introspective component of this unit. Time will be spent on overcoming the hurdles of journal writing, as well as some brainstorming activities to help develop a list of possible topics to write on. The journaling activities will be a year-long ongoing component of the curriculum unit.

After the first grading period, autobiographical reading and writing responses will begin and will consist of at least two to three reading and writing assignments per assessment period. The goal is to have a total of at least five to seven selections of autobiographical writing before the year's end. One of the writing assignments will focus on the family, and it will be at this time that I will provide training in interviewing so that the students might have the actual experience of interviewing a family member. The final project (if time allows) is the accumulation of materials written into a "memory" book that will be finished prior to the completion of the school year. As indicated, two specific types of writing will be used within the bounds of the curriculum unit: journaling and specific topic writing assignments.

Reiterating that students take "ownership of the writing when it matters to them" is Linda Rief, in her book *Seeking Diversity: Language Arts and the Adolescent*. How one gets them to take ownership is by using writing exercises to get them to think about themselves. One of the quickest ways to get them to think about themselves is through the use of journaling as a classroom activity. Having used journaling in the classroom before, it is an effective tool for getting a student to express inner thoughts and feelings, but the writing is too loose to be an effective method of teaching the writing process, as well as the components of writing: the necessary and much needed spelling, grammar, and mechanics. The assessment process which will be discussed in lesson plans is not geared for this. The journaling activity is to get students thinking about themselves; it is a repository of their thoughts and feelings, their daybook, an ongoing record of their lives.

Although there are many goals in the exercise of the daily journal, one of these goals is for it to be a place for extracting ideas for larger pieces of writings. To achieve this ultimate goal of larger pieces of writings, journal writing will be used as a method to get them off and running, a sort of “warm-up” for the larger writing pieces. Having the expectation of the writing of larger pieces is overwhelming for even the most seasoned writer. I am reminded by an old adage I have been taught to use when faced with what looks like an impossible or huge task. The adage: How do you eat an elephant? One bit at a time. Having been taught to break the large task into smaller tasks, the regular writing of the journal breaks down the writing process into “one bite at a time.” This “breaking it down into manageable components” in-and-of-itself is a tool for the student when approaching assignments or tasks which seem insurmountable.

The teachers’ role in the journaling activity is to maintain the environment for consistent and uninterrupted writing time, help the student focus on topics, and help them see the value in their writing no matter how off-the-wall or trivial it may seem.

The writing of the larger autobiographical piece is interconnected with the journaling as well as with the reading of specific excerpts of autobiographical pieces. Specific pieces of text from autobiographies will be chosen for the student to read that will connect with the student emotionally. An example might be the following excerpt from Andrew Pham’s, *Catfish and Mandala*:

I didn’t mind the work. It was fun, clowning around with the guys and drinking sodas we stole from the workers’ refrigerators. Though of course, if my father knew I was cleaning offices instead of studying, he’d crap a load of bricks. He had levered us off welfare and bought a house, so money was really tight at home. Mom was constantly saving, cutting corners with the groceries. Sometimes, I felt like I had to get some meat in me or I was going to go crazy. I kept on telling her, *We’re in America, Mom. You can’t feed a whole family on eight ounces of beef.* And my father kept on telling me, *Don’t think about material things. Hone your mind. Sacrifice now so you have later.* He told me a slew of other stuff, too, but it didn’t matter to me. I had made it a point not to talk to him, never asking anything and never giving any reply other than, yes, no, and *I don’t know.* Besides, I knew every word before it came out of his mouth. *I sacrifice so you can study and make a better life for yourself...blah...blah...blah...* (237)

Pham’s response to his father about a variety of issues—working without him knowing it, disobeying him, disconnecting from him by not listening to him, stealing when he was working—seem so typical. What adolescent could not connect with Pham’s response to his father’s rules and lectures? Then I wondered if this was a typically American adolescent response. This led to greater questions since Pham lived in Vietnam until ten before coming to America. Was he responding as a typical adolescent or a typical American adolescent? Then the question arose as to whether all adolescences have the same issues with parental authority as Pham. I will say that when I read this excerpt for the first time, I immediately connected to his response to his dad’s rules and lecture, although separated from Pham by age, sex, ethnicity, and country of origin.

The reading of this excerpt is an excellent springboard for discussion in the classroom on so many levels, and the outgrowth of the discussion can lead to one of the specific larger writing pieces. This is just one example of how excerpts from autobiographical writings are read, discussed and then used for writing larger autobiographical pieces by the student.

The specific larger autobiographical writing pieces will address the themes of connecting with family, connecting with community, and connecting with self. Writing assignments focusing on connecting with the family might be writing about such topics as their parent(s), their grandparents, where the family is from, family stories, creation of a family tree, or writing about their brother(s), sister(s), or a special relative. I would also include some interview training – the

teaching of “asking the question” to gain information to assist in the writing of this aspect of the autobiographical writing. Writing assignments focusing on connecting with the “self” might include writing about their early years, or a favorite childhood memory, animals or pets, chores and responsibilities around the house, nicknames, happy or sad times, favorite places, growing up, dreams, best friend(s), fears, talents, dealing with problems, relationships, etc. Connecting with the community might include writing about schools, local hangouts, holiday activities, traditions, neighborhoods, or special relatives.

The final results of this year-long process will be self-examination through the journaling, writing development through the larger writing of autobiographical pieces, and perhaps a little more tolerance for those who are different.

LESSON PLANS

Lesson One: Introspective Writing Through the Use of a Journal

The *objective* of the journal writing is to provide students with positive successful writing and daily opportunities to record their individual ideas. The journals are personal; they are not to be graded, revised, or rewritten, and are to be shared with others only if the author chooses to share with classmates. Although there is no assessment on the writings within the confines of the journal, there is *assessment* of the journaling process, in other words a grade is given for the “good faith participation” which is based on attitude, effort, and completion of a particular journaling assignment. The topics will always be broad, for they will reflect the interest and thinking of the individual students. The *activities* in the journal will be to provide daily opportunities for writing personal thoughts or responses to specific questions or ideas.

There will be a daily writing format; basically it will be the same every day. Chosen will be a period of time strictly for writing. The time period will no less than ten minutes and no more than twenty minutes. The period should also be sustained and uninterrupted.

To start this part of the curriculum unit, initial instruction needs to be done so that the student/class can grasp the goals of the daily journal exercise. First and foremost, it must be made clear what the reasons are for this daily journaling activity. Discussion should occur as to why journaling is an important tool for the writing activities needed to complete the class, but also how one can learn from his or her own words, how one has a need to share his or her innermost thoughts, and how this sharing can help one discover and come to know one’s inner-self better. It should also be discussed that journaling does not always have to be serious, it can be fun and lighthearted and a place to celebrate. Reinforce that the point of the journaling exercise is to help writers discover themselves and their writing voice.

Initially some ground rules will be put in place to establish the journaling routine and make it successful. There needs to be rules and guidelines that protect the students’ privacy. The guidelines will also encourage the students to express and be more aware of their innermost thoughts/feelings. The following rules for a “journal contract” between teacher and student are provided (Coles Trader).

“My Journal Contract” (for students)

- It is personal.
- Each student will decide what to write.
- It will never be corrected or graded.
- No person will read my journal without my permission.
- All students should have notebooks.

“My Journal Contract” (for teacher)

- Keep journals in a private place.
- Gain the students’ confidence and respect their journal.
- Respond to the concept of the entry and not the mechanics.
- Do not write in red ink, and do not read or respond to everything.

In the beginning of the journaling process, a brainstorming session can occur, so the student can create individualized lists that will serve as a starting point for journal entries. Examples of list might be:

I hate _____.
I was afraid when _____.
Recently, _____ happened.
My biggest problem is _____.
_____ wasn’t fair to me when _____.

This is just an example; the students are the best source of possible writing topics for their journals. If out of ideas and all else fails, have them journal a response to a piece of literature or a quotation. Ask the questions: What did you like about the selection just read? What did you dislike about the selection just read? Could you connect with the main character, and why? Did the main character remind you of anyone you know? Open ended sentence starters might be: the selection makes me think about...or this situation reminds me of a situation in my own life and let me tell you how (Codon).

The newspaper can be used as a source of stimulus and interest for writing entries and can serve, along with other news periodicals, as a transition point from personal concerns into a community or societal view of the news.

The journal writing experience should get the creative juices flowing for students since it will provide the writing of what is “near and dear” to them, and in doing so it should provide a positive writing experience and help them develop their own “voice” and material for the longer narrative autobiographical pieces.

Lesson Two: Reading Excerpts from Autobiographies

Various autobiographies will be used to glean excerpts for the students to read. A list of some which were either referenced or for which I have a natural affinity is included at the end of this unit. This list is not a complete list of possible sources for autobiographical excerpts that could be used. The choice of excerpts will be dependent on the interest expressed by the students. They may express interest in their experience in learning a second language—a common one for the students I teach. The Richard Rodriguez and Andrew Pham’s memoirs, as well as many others, deal with this issue as a part of their autobiographical experience. Those excerpts can be pulled for that specific interest.

The objective of the reading is to provide enough of the excerpt, so that students have the opportunity to “find out what it’s like to see the world from another point of view, from inside the skin of another person” (Bauer 123-124), while simultaneously providing a springboard to discussion and a specific subjects for students. Activities may include the reading of excerpts, writing a response to the excerpt in a daily journal, discussion of the excerpt, and idea generation of how this piece might be used as a springboard for their own larger autobiographical pieces. Assessment will be the reviewing of the journal entry. These entries will have a different requirement than the usual daily journaling activity outlined in lesson one.

Lesson Three: Larger Autobiographical Writing Pieces

The objective of the larger autobiographical writing pieces is to assess the student's writing formally. The activities involved in the writing of the larger autobiographical pieces will involve the writing process: planning and organizing/prewriting, rough drafting, review/revising, final draft. Assessment of the piece will be based on a rubric design which includes: use/follow the components of the writing process; and mechanics of writing: spelling and grammar. The larger autobiographical pieces will be completed in a timely manner with a requirement of one or two per grading period for a total of five to ten pieces.

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Works Cited

- Allen-Taylor, J. Douglas. "Cycle of Life." <<http://old.fairfieldweekly.com/articles/pham.html>>. This is an in-depth interview with autobiographer Andrew X. Pham when his book was first published.
- Atwell, Nancy. *In the Middle: New Understandings about Writing, Reading, and Learning 2nd Edition*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1998. This book has been a helpful resource in my class since I began teaching. It is very helpful to a teacher trying to set up the reading writing workshop classroom.
- "Autobiography." 24 October 2006. *Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia*. <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Autobiography>>.
- Bauer, Susan Wise. *The Well-Educated Mind: A Guide to the Classical Education You Never Had*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 2003. Designed as a guide for someone who is home schooling their child(ren); I used it as a resource for my own education and have since used its ideas in the classroom.
- Coden, Bill. "I Am..." Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute. <<http://www.cis.yale.edu/ynhti/curriculum/units/1988/3/88.03.04.x.html>>. A source for using journaling in the classroom.
- Coles Trader, Barbara W. "Practical Writing in the Intermediate Grades." Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute. <<http://www.cis.yale.edu/ynhti/curriculum/units/1986/4/86.04.14.x.html>>. A source for writing in middle school that has ideas for all components of the writing process
- Frey, James. *A Million Little Pieces*. New York, N.Y.: Anchor, 2005. A controversial memoir recently turning the literary world upside down and has the reader of autobiographies questioning the notion of truthfulness in the autobiography.
- "Memoir." 25 October 2006. *Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia*. <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Memoir>>.
- Pascal, Roy. *Design and Truth in Autobiography*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1960. A book referenced constantly as a source for answering criticism or questions about the concept of "truth" in autobiographical writing.
- Pham, Andrew X. *Catfish and Mandala: A Two-Wheeled Voyage through the Landscape and Memory of Vietnam*. New York, N. Y.: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999. An American odyssey in the form of an account of a solo bicycle journey around the Pacific Rim to Vietnam made by a young Vietnamese-American man in pursuit of both his adopted homeland and his forsaken fatherland.
- Rief, Linda. *Seeking Diversity: Language Arts with Adolescents*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1992. This book has been a helpful resource in my class since I began teaching. It is very helpful to a teacher trying to set up the reading writing workshop classroom. The foreword is written by Nancy Atwell.
- Rodriguez, Richard. *Hunger for Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez*. New York: Bantam, 1982. A Mexican American's story of his journey from "minority student" to "making it" in middle-class America and the cost paid for his social assimilation and academic success.
- Ruth, Leo. "Reading Children's Writing." *The Reading Teacher*, 1987, vol. 40, no. 8, 756-760. This article discusses the importance of validating children through their writing.
- Saint Augustine. *Confessions*. New York, N.Y.: Penguin Books, 1961. This is the first autobiography written in western culture and is the story of a man's struggle to find God.

- Thoreau, Henry David. *Walden/The Portable Thoreau*. New York, N. Y.: Viking Press, Inc., 1947.
An account of his two-year stay at a cabin near Walden Pond. This American Transcendentalist writer has influenced many including Ghandi and Martin Luther King.
- Troupe, Quincy and Schulte, Rainier, eds. “*Invisible Man*, by Ralph Ellison” *Giant Talk*. New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1975.
A book filled with excerpts of a variety of minority authors, one of which is Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*.
- Velardi, Patrick A. “Finding Yourself Through Autobiography.” Yale-New Haven Teacher’s Institute.
<<http://www.cis.yale.edu/ynhti/curriculum/units/1988/3/88.03.11.x.html>>.
A source for the use of journaling and the reading of autobiographies in the classroom.
- Vidal, Gore. *Palimpsest: A Memoir*. New York, NY: Random House, 1995.
A prolific writer who also wrote a memoir: historical connections to the Kennedy family and his own celebrity life makes for good reading.
- Webster’s Dictionary for Everyday Use, 1986 Edition*. Baltimore, MD: Ottenheimer Publishers, Inc, 1986.
- Welty, Eudora. *One Writer’s Beginnings*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984.
A book that speaks to how the author began to write as a child; an excellent source for a writer just starting out.

Supplemental Resources

I maintain an idea folder filled with clippings, articles, etc. and a bookshelf filled with books that might be grabbed for ideas to meet a specific classroom need. The book and articles listed below are part of this collection. Although not specifically referenced in this curriculum unit, they have contributed to and influenced the writing of it.

- Calkins, Lucy McCormick. *The Art of Teaching Writing*. Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 1986.
- Coden, Bill. “Who Do You Think You Are?” Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute.
<<http://www.cis.yale.edu/ynhti/curriculum/units/1982/2/82.02.02.x.html>>.
- Doyle, Diana. “All About Me.” Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute.
<<http://www.cis.yale.edu/ynhti/curriculum/units/1988/3/88.03.06.x.html>>.
- Hylton, Charlotte H. “Knowledge of Self through the Study of Autobiography/Biography.” Yale-New Haven Teacher’s Institute. <<http://www.cis.yale.edu/ynhti/curriculum/units/1988/3/88.03.09.x.html>>.
- Sheehan, Stephanie J. “Defining Cultural Identity: Thinking Outside the Box.” Yale-New Haven Teacher’s Institute.
<<http://www.cis.yale.edu/ynhti/curriculum/units/2005/2/05.02.09.x.html>>.

Autobiographical Books to be Considered in the Teaching of this Curriculum Unit

- Frank, Anne. *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl*. New York, N.Y. Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1967.
The diary entries of a fifteen year old Jewish girl who dies in the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in Holland during WWII.
- Franklin, Benjamin. *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*. New York, N. Y.: Pocket Books, Inc., 1939.
The first American autobiography – his story as a printer, inventor, statesman and signer of the Declaration of Independence.
- Gaines, Ernest. *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*. New York, N.Y.: Bantam Books, 1975.

Books Written from Actual Taped Interviews and Follows the Traditional Pattern of the Slave Narrative

- Keller, Helen. *The Story of My Life*. New York, N.Y.: Scholastic, 1967.
The story of a blind, deaf mute’s struggle to communicate with her teacher, Annie Sullivan.
- Kingston, Maxine Hong. *The Warrior Woman: Memoir of a Girlhood among Ghosts*. New York, N.Y.: Vintage Books/Random House, 1975.
The story of a Chinese American female growing up in California.
- Moody, Anne. *Coming of Age in Mississippi*. New York, N. Y.: Dell Publishing Co./Dial Press, Inc., 1968.
An account of racial prejudice as seen by a young woman in Mississippi and her later experiences in NAACP, CORE, and the civil rights movement.
- Pham, Andrew X. *Catfish and Mandala: A Two-Wheeled Voyage through the Landscape and Memory of Vietnam*. New York, N. Y.: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999.
An American odyssey in the form of an account of a solo bicycle journey around the Pacific Rim to Vietnam by a young Vietnamese-American man in pursuit of both his adopted homeland and his forsaken fatherland.

- Rodriguez, Richard. *Hunger for Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez*. New York: Bantam, 1982.
A Mexican American's story of his journey from "minority student" to "making it" in middle-class America and the cost paid for his social assimilation and academic success
- Tashlik, Phyllis, ed. *Hispanic, Female and Young: An Anthology*. Houston: Arte Publico Press, 1994.
Touching stories which often are autobiographical which will touch many, but particularly the young Hispanic female.
- Thoreau, Henry David. *Walden/The Portable Thoreau*. New York, N. Y.: Viking Press, Inc., 1947.
An account of his two-year stay at a cabin near Walden Pond; an American Transcendentalist writer whose writings influenced many including Ghandi and Martin Luther King.