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Dr, Warner

English 112B

Looking into the Past to Treasure the Future: A Unit Study on Biographies and Memoirs

Rationale

Students in today's day and age no longer seem to have an interest in learning history because everything they have learned has become overdone and to them seems to be irrelevant to their time. They are constantly looking at the past to analyze what has been done before and what the students can learn from them. Unfortunately what has not been taught to them, is how they can connect to the different lives of different people. All these different people that have captivating, inspiring, and motivating stories that can happen to anyone. Students do not realize that before famous people became history makers, they were ordinary people going through a struggle and surviving. The genre of biographies and memoirs, contain such rich history that can help diversify the class with so many classroom discussions involving real life problems, such as: racial tensions, rape, daily struggles, feeling of isolation, etc. Biographies and memoirs bring so much to the table that the possibilities are endless.

My unit of study unites the value of the life presented in the text to the lives of the students who are reading it. Every person has a story and every person is important, this is what brings a safe and interactive learning environment. The teacher gives value to the students' life through the different activities that will be presented throughout the unit. My unit of study

focuses on the value of biographies and memoirs to the students. The students will learn how to appreciate the lives of different people and apply strengths from the text to struggles they themselves may be dealing with or may deal with in life. For some students this will become a unit of study that they will treasure and remember for the rest of their lives, even if they don't remember the teacher, they will remember the lessons that were taught.

In order to have a productive unit, good biographies and/or memoirs should be chosen. A question then arises, "what makes a good biography?" According to K. Bucher and M.L. Manning, from Prentice

"In a good biography, the individual's character is revealed to the reader through the details and events of his or her life and as a complex individual with his or her own share of human strengths as well as weaknesses. Readers can understand and, at least sometimes, relate to the person's feelings of frustration and happiness. A good biography should depict the life of an individual in ways that allow the reader to question, evaluate, and analyze the narrative to identify the pattern or meaning in the person's life."

A biography gives explicit details about their lives, which enables the readers or students to become active readers. They indulge in the richness of good imagery, vivid language, and detailed emotions. It makes the person more real than they already are; it gives them complexity. Complexity meaning, that they have their own problems; it can doubt about their morals, values, priorities, or other things that are important in the narrator's life. The good biography gives the person more depth, it is filled with what YA literature is all about, and nothing is black

and white. It depicts not only the person's strengths, but their weaknesses too. It is important to show the students how real the person is. A person becomes real to the students when they are shown human; when they are shown with different kinds of strengths and weaknesses because students are the same. The students will be able to connect better because they would have had experienced similar emotions in different situations. Biographies give students the opportunity to explore the lives of different people and examine what makes them important or relevant; which in turn allows the student to explore their own life in search of their uniqueness. The good biography allows space to ponder on the actions, thoughts, or ideas presented. When there are such moments being described the students are then able to analyze what those moments may mean. The questions or ideas created would be a reaction involving their own upbringings. They will learn to give value to their own perspective on a memoir. The activities that are linked to the texts will create motives to evaluate and reflect the lives of people they read about to that of their surroundings or themselves. Giving purpose, meaning, value to what they learn that is not just meeting a Common Core Standard, but instead it is a lesson so much greater that they will carry with them forever; which in turn will be reflected in their future.

My canonical pieces for the unit of study on biographies will be *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* and *A Place to Stand* by Jimmy Santiago Baca. I have decided to pair an autobiography and a memoir together from two different ethnicities, different states, and circumstances because they both struggle throughout their life to make a difference. Students will learn that any and every person is important and valuable; that their experiences create a special uniqueness in them. Although, Malcolm X is an iconic civil rights leader, Jimmy Baca stands for the ones who were abandoned in a crazy world, with no proper teachings, but the ones

they come to experience. The common themes of survival, identity, and the importance of education resound throughout the text. Students will come to evaluate the importance of language and the difference it made for these two people and how it has made a difference in theirs. These literature pieces will be used as tools to open the space for discussion on real-life troubles. The unit will be filled with short and long readings, poetry, short writing assignments, including their own memoir. Their assignments will be structured in a way that they will have an encounter with their inner voice. The moments they treasure will be given value, giving value to their persona. I believe writing creates that space for them to write what they feel or believe is important.

Introduction to the Unit

Launching a unit is not easy, especially when it will encourage the students to step out of their comfort zone and become vulnerable. Vulnerability, is difficult to do in high school because of the different social pressures that are constantly pulling at young adults. It is a struggle that they carry internally. By starting the unit, I will play the song “Dare You to Move” by Switchfoot, which is available to watch at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iOTcr9wKC-o> , and hand them a handout with the lyrics [Attached lyrics Assignment #1]. Once they have finished watching the music video, they will write for five minutes in their journals. They will respond to the writing prompt provided:

After watching the video and reading the lyrics, what do you think he is trying to say through the lyrics? Do you identify with anything that was shown in the video? How or why? If not, why don't you identify with anything? Has there been a moment in your life when you struggled with

who you believe you are and who you want to become? When was that moment? Was it hard? Was it easy? How or why was it a struggle? How did you feel? What did you? Write about anything that comes to your mind.

As they begin to write, I will play the video one more time softly in the background in order to help them write. After the five minutes are up, one or two volunteers will share what they wrote. The answers will be different because they each will catch something different in the video. Regardless of what the students' answers were, they will be thinking about struggles with identity and taking action. It will bring discussion with the thoughts of things they may want to break free of and things they want to change or do in their lives. The overall introduction of the class should take no more than fifteen minutes.

I will change the pace and begin to introduce what memoirs and biographies are for about ten minutes [Handout 1]. In the introduction of the definitions of memoirs and biographies, I will then introduce the books that the class will be reading. I created an overview of what they will be doing on a daily basis, as well as the homework assignments. The memoir of Jimmy Santiago Baca will be read in class and will be guided with in class discussions while *Malcolm X*, will be taken home to read. The students will be given about sixteen pages to read per night and on the weekends are expected to read thirty-two pages. They will be expected to keep up with the reading in order to be able to understand the writing prompts for their daily journal.

When they come in to class they will be having Silent Sustained Writing, responding to the prompts that will be on the board for them. Sometimes we will discuss the prompts as

a Segway to the activities and in class reading that will be done that day. Although, there will be days where we will not discuss the writing prompt as a class, the prompts will be used to assist them in their final project and essays for the class, within the unit of study. The class will be constantly busy and switching gears from one thing to another, but they will have plenty of time to work on every single assignment, and I will be available to assist them with anything that they need.

Suggestions for further reading of biographies and memoirs

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings by Maya Angelou

The book presents a series of memories of Maya Angelou's life from the time she was three and her beloved brother Bailey was four. Much of their childhood was spent under the care of their paternal grandmother, known to them as Momma. They lived in Stamps, Arkansas, in the years before and during the Depression. Stamps was rigidly segregated and Maya, then known as Marguerite, experienced the results of segregation and fear of Blacks.

Bailey and Marguerite are first sent to Stamps because their parents divorced. Eventually they are taken back to live with their mother in St. Louis. During this time, their mother, Vivian Baxter, is living with Mr. Freeman. Freeman begins sexually abusing Marguerite and eventually rapes her. Eight-year-old Marguerite is threatened with Bailey's death if she reveals anything about the assault. Because she is so ill after the rape, her mother does find out and Freeman is brought to trial. He is later found

murdered, and Marguerite believes that her “words” caused his death. She becomes silent for many months following the assault.

The memoirs also chronicle Marguerite (Maya’s) and Bailey’s adolescence, poignantly describing what it meant to be Black in the pre-Civil Right era. (Warner, 113)

A Child Called It by David Pelzer

This graphic and incredibly tragic book reveals the horrible abuse David Pelzer experienced from the time he was a first grader until he was rescued, through the efforts of teachers and other school personnel, and placed into foster care. Pelzer tells the events as he remembers them and unfolds issues revealing a family in great pain—with Pelzer taking the brunt of his mother’s psychotic behaviors. (Warner 149)

Latifa: My Forbidden Face: Growing Up Under the Taliban—A Young Woman’s Story

Latifa is a teenager in Kabul, Afghanistan, on September 27, 1996, when the Taliban take control of Kabul. From this day, her family, her city, and her country are never the same. Yes, she lived a childhood that was seldom free of bombing and attacks, but she had never faced the oppression that came with the Taliban controlling Kabul. Her mother, who is a doctor, can no longer practice medicine—especially not medicine for women; after the Taliban, women cannot get any medical treatment. Latifa had just passed the first part of the university exams and was hoping for a career in journalism. After the takeover, she cannot attend school and all hopes of a “normal” career are gone.

She and many others, especially women, become prisoners in their own homes. (warner 200)

Films

“Girl Rising”

The movie tells the stories of nine girls from different parts of the world who face arranged marriages, child slavery, and other heartbreaking injustices. Despite these obstacles, the brave girls offer hope and inspiration. By getting an education, they’re able to break barriers and create change. (*Seventeen Magazine*)

Works Cited

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	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Week 1	Assignment #1: “Dare You to Move” Handout #1: Introduction to Biographies and Memoirs Lecture on Malcolm X and Jimmy Santiago Baca HW: Read <i>Malcolm X</i> pgs.1-25 Write a one page explanation about what you think the title <i>A Place to Stand</i> means or why do you think that is the book’s title	Assignment #2: Reading History In class discussion of last night’s homework In class reading of <i>A Place to Stand</i> pgs.1-19 Assignment #3: Peer Discussion HW: Read <i>Malcolm X</i> pgs. 26-43	Assignment #4: Identity Assignment #5: Symbolic Recipe In class reading of <i>A Place to Stand</i> pgs. 20-42 HW: Read <i>Malcolm X</i> pgs. 44-60	Handout #2: Final Project In class reading <i>A Place to Stand</i> pgs. 43-66 HW: Read <i>Malcolm X</i> pgs. 60-77	Assignment #6: Right vs. Wrong Assignment #7: Letter to a Younger Self In class reading <i>A Place to Stand</i> pgs. 66-80 HW: Read <i>Malcolm X</i> pgs. 77-109 Finish Letter to a Younger Self
Week 2	Assignment #8: Favorite Quotes Peer Discussion In class reading <i>A Place to Stand</i> pgs. 81-96 HW: Read <i>Malcolm X</i> pgs. 110-127 Finish Favorite Quotes Assignment	Assignment #9: What’s in a Name? In class reading <i>A Place to Stand</i> pgs. 97-110 HW: Read <i>Malcolm X</i> pgs. 128-144 Finish Assignment #9	Assignment #10: Ode to Self In class reading <i>A Place to Stand</i> pgs. 110-130 HW: Read <i>Malcolm X</i> pgs. 145-161 Finish Assignment #10	Watch film “Girl Rising” Assignment #11: Where I’m From In class reading <i>A Place to Stand</i> pgs. 131-150 HW: Read <i>Malcolm X</i> pgs. 162-178	In class reading <i>A Place to Stand</i> pgs. 151-182 HW: Read <i>Malcolm X</i> pgs. 179-211

Week 3	Assignment #12: Importance of Education In class reading <i>A Place to Stand</i> pgs. 183-199 HW: Read Malcolm X pgs. 212-228 catch up on any work	In class reading <i>A Place to Stand</i> pgs. 200-220 In class work HW: Read Malcolm X pgs. 229-245	Assignment #13: Work of Art In class reading <i>A Place to Stand</i> pgs. 221-240 HW: Read Malcolm X pgs. 246-262	In class reading <i>A Place to Stand</i> pgs. 241-264 HW: Read Malcolm X pgs. 263-279	Assignment #14: Response to <i>A Place to Stand</i> HW: Read Malcolm X pgs. 280-312 Finish response to <i>A Place to Stand</i>
Week 4	Assignment #15: Reflection Paper on Unit HW: Read Malcolm X pgs.313-329	In class work Finish project HW: Read Malcolm X pgs. 330-346	In class work Finish Project HW: Read Malcolm X pgs. 346-389	Presentations of Final Projects	Finish Presentations of Final Project

Journals will be collected every Monday by assigned row. If your journal is collected and there is an assigned journal assignment, you will type up your paper in MLA format, turned in at the beginning of class the next day.

Assignment #1

“Dare You to Move”

Welcome to the planet

Welcome to existence

Everyone’s here

Everyone’s here

Everybody’s watching you now

Everybody waits for you now

What happens next

What happens next

[Chorus]

I dare you to move

I dare you to move

I dare you to lift yourself up off the floor

I dare you to move

I dare you to move

Like today never happened

Today never happened before

Welcome to the fallout

Welcome to the resistance

The tension is here

Tension is here

Between who you are and who you could be

Between how it is and how it should be

[Chorus]

Maybe redemption has stories to tell
Maybe forgiveness is right where you fell
Where can you run to escape from yourself?

Where you gonna go?

Where you gonna go?

Salvation is here

I dare you to move

I dare you to move

I dare you to lift yourself up off the floor

I dare you to move

I dare you to move

I dare you to lift yourself up off the floor

I dare you to move

I dare you to move

Like today never happened

Today never happened

Today never happened

Today never happened before

--Switchfoot

Source: <http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/switchfoot/dareyoutomove.html>

After watching the video and reading the lyrics, what do you think he is trying to say through the lyrics? Do you identify with anything that was shown in the video? How or why? If not, why

don't you identify with anything? Has there been a moment in your life when you struggled with who you believe you are and who you want to become? When was that moment? Was it hard? Was it easy? How or why was it a struggle? How did you feel? What did you? Write about anything that comes to your mind.

Handout #1: Introduction to Biographies and Memoirs

Definitions:

Biography: noun. An account of someone's life written by someone else.

- Writing of such a type as a branch of literature.
- A human life in its course.

Memoir: noun. **1.** A historical account or biography written from personal knowledge or special sources. • (memoirs) an autobiography or a written account of one's memory of certain events or people. **2.** An essay on a learned subject. • (memoirs) the proceedings of transactions of a learned society.

Source: Dictionary. Version 2.2.3 © 2005-2011 Apple Inc.

The Autobiography of Malcolm X

You will be expected to keep up with the readings assigned. Be ready to discuss the book in class. We will be having in class writing and quizzes based on your understanding of the book. If you are having trouble understanding please feel free to stay after school, so that I may be able to assist you.

A Place to Stand by Jimmy Santiago Baca

We will be reading *A Place to Stand*, in class. We will be having in depth discussions about the themes and connecting it to *Malcolm X*. In the beginning of the third week, we will be having an in-class assignment regarding the reading on page 174 to 176 in *Malcolm X*. Make sure that you are keeping up with the reading and writing in your journal on the assigned days.

Assignment #2: Reading History

In your journal answer these questions in free write form:

- Who taught you to read? Was it fun? Easy? Difficult?
- Do you like to read? Why or why not?
- Is reading easy or difficult for you?
- Do you like others to read to you? Who read to you when you were little?
- How does reading make you feel? Why?
- Where do you like to read?
- Do you read for fun? Do you read for school or work?
- What do you like to read? What don't you like to read?
- What does reading mean to you? How important is reading to you?

Assignment #3: Peer Discussion

With your partner discuss the importance of family. Why is family important to you? Why does Jimmy want to be with his father, even though he is an alcoholic? Based off of your answers from last night's homework, why do you think Jimmy feels like he needs a place to stand? What is the significance of belonging?

Assignment #4: Identity

Why do you believe identity is important? What makes up an identity? What do you consider to be your identity? Based off of your readings, what does Malcolm X try to identify with? Why is it difficult for Malcolm to fit in?

Assignment #5: Symbolic Recipe

Write a recipe for what it takes to be you. What makes you special or unique from everyone else? Write it as if you are writing a recipe for food. For example, a teaspoon of heart or a cup of determination. It can be whatever you believe is needed to be you. Write two recipes. One recipe of what it takes to be you and the second recipe for what it takes to make you happy, when you're down.

Handout #2: Final Project

Your final project will consist of all your works you have done in the unit.

The following will be included in your final project:

- *Where I'm From*
- *Symbolic Recipe*
- *Ode to Self*
- *Letters to Younger Self*
- *Favorite Quotes*
- *What's in a name*
- *Reflection Paper*
- *Work of Art*

Do not panic, this will all be done gradually. Keep up with all the readings, homework assignments, and come to class prepared and you will surely receive a passing grade. I will be here during break, lunch, and after school if you need the extra assistance.

This project is a total of 200 points. That means each item is worth 25 points. The rubrics for each item will be on the handout of the assignment.

Where I'm From	25 points
Symbolic Recipe	25 points
Ode to Self	25 points
Letters to Younger Self	25 points
Favorite Quotes	25 points
What's in a Name?	25 points
Reflection Paper	25 points
Work of Art	25 points
Total points	200 points

Assignment #6: Right vs. Wrong

Write about a time in which you were supposed to do the right thing, but instead you did the wrong thing. What made one act right and the other act wrong? If you could change what you did, what would you have done? What did you learn? How are Malcolm X and Jimmy Baca doing right or wrong things?

Assignment #7: Letters to a Younger Self

If you could write a letter to a younger you, what would you tell yourself? How young would you be?

Directions: Write a letter to a younger you. What would you tell yourself? What advice would you give yourself?

Assignment #8: Favorite Quotes

Write a favorite quote or saying. Explain why it is your favorite. Does it inspire you? Does it motivate you? Does it encourage you? Explain why. Explain how it came to be important to you. If you could recommend it to someone, who would you recommend it to? Why? Give details.