



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute  
1980 Volume I: Adolescence and Narrative: Strategies for Teaching Fiction

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## **An Introduction to Don Quixote**

Curriculum Unit 80.01.01  
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### ***OBJECTIVES***

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American students, unlike Europeans, are not prodded to learn foreign language, to incorporate it into their general knowledge and schooling. Therefore, at the time they do begin a formal study of it, it is a cumbersome and undesirable task.

Nevertheless, as I plunged into my new career as a teacher of foreign languages, I exhibited the all powerful signs of the total emotional involvement of the first year teacher. My students were going to be fluent in Spanish by the end of the year, they were going to remember every single word they were to be taught, and, of course, they were all going to love the language.

In retrospect, I wonder how many of my goals were even attainable. The curriculum for first year middle school students is dry and unexciting, “enhanced” by the use of surplus high school A-LM (audio-lingual method) textbooks which present material and vocabulary in dull and disorderly fashion. These textbooks are also used by *all* students: low achieving, high achieving and average alike. I gradually came to the conclusion that the curriculum is geared toward nobody and, therefore, many changes were in order.

I decided to supplement the curriculum myself (without consulting a supervisor; everytime I introduced something I thought would be helpful to my students, I was met with opposition on several fronts—“they have to learn what we gave you in the curriculum guide,” or “what are they going to do with that!?”).

One day, I began a discussion with my top group on literature. The discussion, very appropriately in a Spanish class, was eventually to lead to the subject of Don Quixote, the Man of La Mancha. We talked briefly about Cervantes and his times by studying general background information. I had intended to just tell my students about this “crazy guy” named Don Quixote, a fictional character of Cervantes’ who thought he was a knight errant and went around Spain being chivalrous, but I was surprised by what actually ensued.

The students wanted to know more, such as, “what things did he do?” and “how did he get crazy?” Also, they wanted to know how Cervantes managed to write about something like this back in a time that we think of as being full of literary lace and finery.

I hesitated a moment, thinking about the consequences of, once again, introducing something new and

“uncalled for” into THE curriculum. At the same time, however, I was torn within at the thought of that promised “teacher wriggle room” which was supposed to be all my own space when that door was closed. So, I looked around at my students, people within whom I had sparked an interest, developed a rapport, and respected for their incredible wit, enthusiasm and general thirst for knowledge and asked, “How would you like me to get an English version of *Don Quixote* into our class and read some of it to you?” (There was no way I could order a set for the whole class, and besides, it was all supposed to be done in secret). My question was met with war whooping approval; that very afternoon I was up in our school library to check over the various editions and the translations it held, and to choose which one would best suit my students. (Usually, when *Don Quixote* is translated, the language either remains a very flowery kind of English or else it is simplified into a Golden Book prose.) I chose one ( *The Adventures of Don Quixote* , translated by Dominick Daly, MacMillan Company, 1957) that I felt would be simple enough for me to edit as I went along, and interesting enough to retain some of Cervantes’ style.

One very important factor in my introducing this material was that it was going to be used for enjoyment—I was not so interested in having my students be familiar with all details of *Don Quixote* as I was in having them make its acquaintance. I felt that the middle school curriculum gave them very little to enjoy ( especially those students who had been put into a foreign language class but who could not in any way grasp the concept of something as basic to learning language as conjugating a verb). *Don Quixote* was going to be a versatile supplement in all levels of achievement:

1. *low achieving students* —These students were going to be given a break from the “drudgery” of grammar. They had poor speaking and writing patterns in English; I couldn’t possibly expect that foreign language would be something that would come easily and naturally to them. Everything they learned had to be reduced either to total overt relevance or fundamental forms in order to be absorbed. Many of them resented being placed in the class in the first place and were rebellious, refusing to see where foreign language would become incorporated into their life pattern. Quite honestly, I couldn’t argue with them. I had found that these students loved simple crossword puzzles and labeling pictures, and that, I decided, was how I would present this unit to them.
2. *average achieving students* —The attitude in this group was somewhat mixed; some were average students that tried hard, and others were average students who did the minimal of work in order to get by with a C average. Members of that second group also failed to see the significance in learning foreign language and were perfectly content to fail something that was superfluous to their usually familiar program of study. With these students, one can appeal to their egos by convincing them that with some effort, minimal even, they can acquire at least an appreciation for foreign language. This group had been able to comprehend most grammatical structure, so their study of *Don Quixote* would be one where they could use the verbs and nouns they would learn to make up simple sentences describing the characters in the story in terms of their physical appearance and character traits.
3. *high achieving students* —With this group I “showed no mercy”. I set high standards for them, since I had found their knowledge and abilities so superior as to present *me* with a challenge to teach. As I mentioned earlier, this group is the reason that I knew the curriculum needed supplementation—they were bored and wanted to know more, they wanted to know where the Spanish language ranked among the languages of the world—they were asking for exposure to something that would enhance their knowledge of foreign language study.

These are the students who will elect foreign language to study by choice in later schooling because they know that foreign language study enhances their vocabulary, knowledge, and general experience. They know that being bi-lingual makes it easier to obtain high positions in careers that they will choose.

High school Spanish includes learning about *Don Quixote* and Cervantes in some depth (a condensed version is read in Spanish). I feel it is an important thing for students to know about it sooner. (I had never heard about *Don Quixote* before I studied the Spanish version, and I feel that I missed a lot because it was dealt with purely as a story.) I can teach *Don Quixote* to the high achieving group as a sample of great literary work, a contribution to world literature, and I can touch upon its satirical significance.

## STRATEGIES

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All levels of students taking the unit will learn about the geography of Spain through the use of map outlines which they will fill in, label, and embellish as they wish. I also think it would be important for them to know where Spain is located in relation to the rest of Europe (and Africa), and *why* it is and has been important (trade, occupations, and the conquering and settling of lands in foreign areas).

It is necessary to discuss at least briefly the life of Miguel Cervantes, in order to gain a perspective on the era being reflected upon in the actual story. Cervantes' life was not quite typical of his time as his father was a surgeon and the family was wealthier than most (the main occupation of the inhabitants of Spain at the time was farming). Cervantes' name is one that I would like the students to associate with Spain and its progress at the time.

At the time that Cervantes was writing the book, Spain was well into expanding into the New World. Students have been given a pretty broad background in these conquests in their earliest exposures to World History in the third and fourth grades. They know of Queen Isabela, King Ferdinand, Christopher Columbus, and the year 1492, but the jumble of facts which extend beyond are not brought forth in a way that may be relevant and conducive to foreign language learning.

Talking informally in class about the absurd behavior of Cervantes' "hero" leads easily into a discussion of satire—its importance, significance and justification. Cervantes is commenting critically and comparatively on the current events of his own times, contrasted with the medieval times—a well-known era in European history, that of the knight errant. This era existed about two hundred years prior to the times of Cervantes. It was a time of manners and courtly love, the essence of propriety.

There is a whole "science" dedicated to the "art of courtly love". *The Adventures of Don Quixote* is presented in such a way as to expound upon the absolute folly of an entire era. Cervantes brings to light his opinion of the spoken and unspoken, written and unwritten, rules of chivalry. The absurdity becomes apparent in the very first chapter of the book as Don Quixote is preparing to get his act together for the start of his new life as a knight errant; as though all of his research has affected him so as to render him "crazy". He spends his time for days and weeks on end contemplating his riding apparel, his title (his "real" name is Don Quixana) and his horse's name. This deep contemplation is brought out in such a way as to really exaggerate the whole essence of knighthood and chivalry and reveal it as being pure absurdity, or, is it perhaps asking the question, tearfully, "is chivalry dead?". The absurdity is brought into view in not so very subtle manners, accentuating Cervantes' attitude toward Don Quixote as being pathetic, impressionable, insane, but intelligent nonetheless.

I am interested in pointing out such relevant items as Spanish names given to American states and cities, e.g. Florida (flowery), Nevada (snowy), Colorado (colored), Los Angeles (the angels), San Francisco (St. Francis), etc. I am hoping to get students to see that places and things that exist around us everyday have names that are adopted from foreign languages. Some of these things are: patio, veranda, studio, rodeo, lasso, bronco, alimentation, peon, etc.

In conclusion, I feel that the work unit I have planned will be a great asset to the school system for many reasons. The introduction of *Don Quixote* would serve the purpose of giving the students something tangible to learn and, almost inadvertently, expose them to one of the greatest literary works ever published.

They will gain insight into literally a different side of the explorations of Spain in the early 1500's, familiarizing themselves with a writer who existed at the time all these fantastic conquests were occurring.

The lower achieving students will discover a facet of language learning where they can achieve a satisfaction of sorts—grammar and heavy memorization will be allayed and they can listen to a story. Middle achievers can do the same thing; high achievers will learn biography, satire, courtly love and will feel enriched and enlightened.

I would stress that this study be kept informal; I will use it as a background supplement to the drudgery of the curriculum as it now exists.

## ***LESSON PLANS***

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### *I. The Character of Don Quixote*

#### *A. Objectives*

During the first week the students will:

1. recognize the physical and emotional characteristics of Don Quixote;
2. define the terms "knight-errant" and "chivalry";
3. listen to and understand the first chapter of the story of *Don Quixote* ;
4. be able to describe, in Spanish, some physical and emotional characteristics of Don

Quixote.

#### *B. Materials*

1. The book *The Adventures of Don Quixote* .
2. An outline picture of Don Quixote, sketched on a ditto.

#### *C. Procedure*

Don Quixote will be introduced through the use of the outline picture. The students will be told who he was, who created him, where he lived and what his position in the literary world was. The terms "knight-errant" and "chivalry" will then be defined and discussed. The students will listen to the first chapter of the book, after which we will list various physical/emotional characteristics of Don Quixote; They will label the outline picture with his physical characteristics.

### *II. Geography*

#### *A. Objectives*

During the three to four weeks that they spend on this unit the students will:

1. know and understand where Spain is located;
2. recognize the different provinces of Spain;
3. learn and pronounce in Spanish and English the names of some major cities in Spain.

#### B. *Materials*

1. Outline map of southwestern Europe.
2. Crayons.
- 3 World map.

#### C. *Procedure* .

The students will discuss Europe and where it is located. (With the help of the world map, they will see it is across the Atlantic Ocean, east of America—however they gain perspective). They will understand that the difference between Europe and America is that in Europe, each boundary separates different countries; each containing different customs, culture and language.

Focus in on Spain: Spain is comprised of several provinces, each of which was settled by a different group of people.

Each dialect slightly differs (much like the way we have different accents and colloquialisms in English).

The students will be able to locate the major cities of Spain on the map and learn one fact about each (Madrid, Castilla, Sevilla, Barcelona, etc.).

### III. *Biography*

#### A. *Objectives*

Also during the course of the unit the students will:

1. define the term “biography”;
2. recognize and understand the name “Miguel Cervantes”;
3. understand who Miguel Cervantes was;
4. gain perspective of Miguel Cervantes by associating him with the time in which he

lived.

#### B. *Procedure*

The students will discuss the term “biography” and from past acquaintance with the term we will decide on a workable definition (the story of a person’s life written by someone other than the person whose life is being discussed). The students will discuss briefly Miguel Gervantes; where he lived (Spain), his lifetime (1547-1616), what type of family he had, his education, and why he was writing a story about Don Quixote at a time of great prosperity, expansion and turmoil in Spain.

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Capellanus, Andreas. *The Art of Courtly Love* , New York, Columbia University Press, 1941. The title of this book is self explanatory. It depicts a task analyzed description from medieval times of love, how to "court", how love grows, etc.

Cervantes, Miguel de. *The Adventures of Don Quixote* translated by Dominick Daly. The MacMillan Company, New York, 1957. This is the translated version of *Don Quixote* that I would recommend to be used for readings in the class. It is a clear and pleasant translation and retains a good deal of the original story.

Cervantes Saavedra, Miguel de. *Don Quixote* , translated by Charles Jarvis. Pocket Books, Inc., New York, 1957. I found this translation not to be as complete as I liked—it is a satisfactory condensation.

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## BIBLIOGRAPHY II

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Capellanus, Andeas. *The Art of Courtly Love* (see Bibliography I for further information).

Glubok, Shirley, *Knights in Armor* , Harper and Row, New York, 1969. Illustrated book telling about the customs and history of the era of knighthood and chivalry through descriptions of suits of armor in museum pieces and

works of art.

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## Materials

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I prefer using teacher made materials whenever possible as I feel they hold more relevance and uniformity in my teaching.

1. An outline picture of each of the main characters of the story. These can be traced or drawn on a ditto and distributed to each student. Or, students can draw their own sketches of their impressions of the characters. They (the outlines) give the characters a sense of familiarity when they can actually be pictured.
2. *Maps of Spain* . These can be drawn, too, as an outline and distributed or taken from a book and dittoed. The students can fill in the map with rivers, mountains, cities, divide them into provinces and color.
3. *Assorted Worksheets* :
  - a. List of cognates of Spanish/English words.
  - b. Facts about the life of Cervantes.
  - c. Definitions of literary terms (novel, satire, comedy, tragedy, moral, etc.).
4. Record album, "The Man of La Mancha." Students at this age find studies more relevant when they are in movie or play form. Discussion of some songs will help develop interest.

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