



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute  
1982 Volume II: Autobiography

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## Introduction

The curriculum units included in this volume grew out of a seminar on Autobiography held at Yale in the spring and summer of 1982. Anyone reading through them will quickly see that they are not (or are not merely) courses on the *subject* of autobiography. In fact they understand the term “autobiography” very differently from the way it is usually understood. Their notion of autobiography gives that concept both a wider inclusiveness and a greater range of educational uses than it customarily has. I might best introduce the units that follow by saying a few words about what this notion consists of.

Autobiography is usually thought of as a special category of literature, containing full-scale life histories written by eminent people. In our seminar we looked at many autobiographies of this sort, ranging from Rousseau’s *Confessions* to Anne Frank’s *Diary of a Young Girl*, and from the *Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* to the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. But in our discussions we came to identify autobiography not with a set of great books but with a pervasive human impulse: the urge to say or tell our lives, the urge to put our experience into expression. We act out this impulse in countless ways: when we sit down to write our official Life, surely, but equally when we reminisce, or jot in a diary, or share an anecdote or confess a secret or tell about our day. Understood in this way autobiography becomes a general human activity of which formal, written autobiography is only a special case—an activity we engage in constantly, if unconsciously, and that we are all perfectly competent at whether we are celebrities or nonentities, master stylists or novices at writing.

Identifying autobiography with self-expression in the broadest sense, these units also share a vision of what self-expression does to the self it expresses. By custom we think of autobiography as rather passively recording experience that is already complete—first we lived it (as “real life”), now we just put it into words. But our seminar found over and over that the act of expression changes and extends the experience it records: that even when the autobiographer sets out only to say what he already knows of his life, confronting the need to express his life in words compels him to understand it in new ways, compels him to make further *realizations* about the life that seemed fully realized before. Another working assumption of these units, then, is that autobiography’s sort of self-expression is always at least potentially a vehicle for self-discovery—for the bringing to understanding of what, when it happened, just “happened.”

Third, and perhaps most significantly, these units refuse to think of autobiography as a subject separate from the abilities and activities of students. While our seminar was reading classic writings and discussing abstract questions about autobiography, our concern was always with what this study could yield for New Haven high- and middle-school students, and specifically with how it could help develop their powers of verbal expression. This concern is constantly reflected in the units, each of which uses autobiography as the basis for a program

of student writing. Our idea, in making autobiography the matrix for writing assignments, is to connect the often troubled act of writing with a broad activity of communication that students are already competent at and comfortable in. But while they draw on this reservoir of existing communicational skills, the units do not promote casual or uncontrolled self-expression as an end in itself. Rather they aim to use autobiographical self-expression to make students more conscious of the nature and power of expression, as well as to promote the forms of self-discovery—that new knowledge of who we are, where we came from, what matters to us, and why—that the writing of autobiography can produce.

While they share these working assumptions, the units included here are unusually various, both in their approach and in the context they are adapted to. Someone who thinks of autobiography as a literary subject will be surprised to find a unit like Gail Stagers' "His Story/Her Story/Your Story," which proposes to use autobiography (and also student autobiographical writing) as an essential material for the study of black history; or like Thelma Stepan's "Scientific Autobiography," which uses autobiographical writings by scientists through history to introduce new kinds of questions into a traditional chemistry course. Even the units that link autobiography in a more familiar way to English and language arts aim at very different audiences—Rosemary Hamilton's "Scribe of Self" is aimed at middle school students with weak verbal backgrounds; Kathy O'Neil's "The I in You" at middle school students with strong verbal backgrounds; John Severi's meticulously organized "Student Autobiography" aims at high school students who need an especially high degree of organization for their work; Maria Pennacchio's "American Personalities" uses autobiography to enrich a high school program in English as a Second Language. And it is notable how often the proposals, even when they look like standard English courses, experiment in combining language arts with other subjects and activities—as Bill Coden's "Who Do You Think You Are?" combines reading and writing with history-writing and theater games; as Rich Canaleri's "The Voice Within" combines reading and writing with impersonation; or as Michael Conte's "My Place in Time" uses an autobiographical text to open ways into the fields of Geography, History, Art, and Music.

These units are all practical, workable plans for teaching, and we hope that many teachers will benefit from their suggestions. But whether they follow their exact procedures or not, our deepest hope is that these proposals will stimulate teachers to fresh thought of their own about how they organize their classes—and especially, bring a new recognition of how many kinds of study the study of autobiography can enrich.

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