

The Story of Us: An Urban Fifth Grade Class Creates a Living History Document Through Memoir and Photography

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Overview

This is a ten to twelve week unit for fifth graders aimed at challenging and, perhaps changing, the perception that many hold of history as dry and dusty old stuff that really has nothing to do with them. This is a cross-curricular unit that encompasses several disciplines: mathematics, literacy, social studies, and the visual arts. It is intended to enhance and build upon what students have already learned, rather than replace core curriculum elements. Throughout this unit, students will be doing the work of historians as they collect data, analyze and represent their findings, read and write stories about their life and times through memoir, and capture themselves and their community in photographic essays.

So much of what students study as history seems to come to them pre-packaged. Their work here should help them see that history is messy and personal—more collaboration than absolute truths.

Rationale

“Children,” historian Russell Freedman notes, “are not really interested in history—it’s one of their least favorite subjects.” I teach social studies to fifth graders. I know what he’s talking about. Often when I ask students to take out their social studies books. I’m greeted with a chorus of moans and groans (very polite of course) and the slap of the bulky texts being dragged from the cavernous recesses of the desk and plopped, none too gently, onto the desk. I watch and listen, impatient to begin. I don’t get it. Why is it students don’t like history? How can they not see that it is fascinating? It has everything: love, sex, power struggles, heroics, intrigue, humor, ideas, great stories and high drama. Then I think again. Maybe I do get it. History, as it is usually presented, is essentially static. Learning here means acquisition what already is incorporated in books and in the heads of the elders...It is taught as a finished product with little regard to the ways it was built up (Dewey 19). Maybe part of it is the textbook—appropriately multicultural and sanitized. It tries to be all things to all people, just as it tries to be all subjects in one in an inauthentic attempt at being interdisciplinary. Another contributing factor to the

students' attitude towards studying history, despite all efforts to devise projects, initiate discussions, and provide opportunities for critical thinking, is that it is hard for students to be convinced that, the past really *WAS* (Fritz 13). Children aren't easily persuaded that people living long ago experienced the same emotions that we feel today; they were often scared, just as we are today, discouraged, happy, amused, angry, and frustrated. Consequently, most students don't feel any connections to this inanimate past. "Who Cares?!"

History should wake us up because it is the story of ourselves. The story form is a cultural universal; everyone everywhere enjoys stories. The story, then, is not just some casual entertainment. It reflects a basic and powerful form in which we make sense of the world and experience (Egan 2). Many authors, especially those who write history for younger readers see themselves as storytellers who use the genre to bring the past to life. They create vivid detailed scenes for the reader to visualize. Through the use of anecdote they are able to synthesize a picture in the reader's mind that really illuminates the subject. They search for eyewitness accounts in letters, diaries and autobiographies that let us hear the individual voices of the past talking about their experiences. Robert Coles writes that we learn the most lasting lessons through stories (London 5). He views the family as a "miniature state" that is reflective of the real world. Consequently, children's stories and recollections of their time would be an authentic representation (history) of the time in which they are living.

The rationale for this curriculum is to present students with a different way of thinking about history, and ultimately, of learning history. Education, in order to accomplish its ends for the individual learner and for society must be based upon experience. All genuine education comes about through experience (Dewey 89). The goal of the unit is to provide a quality educative experience that creates in students an awareness that history *WAS* and provides them with insights as to how we come to know about it. By having students tell the stories about themselves in narrative/memoir and in photographic essays reflective of them and their milieu they are doing the work of historians and writing a dynamic, living history of their time.

Objectives

During the course of the unit, students will pose quantifiable questions about their lives and the lives of those around them. They will create and conduct surveys to obtain answers to their questions, collect the data, represent it and write about their findings.

Students will read and discuss the works of notable writers and memoirists such as Maya Angelou, Eloise Greenfield, Cynthia Rylant, Jean Little, and Tomie DePaola. They will identify the characteristics and qualities of memoir and then tell their own stories through richly detailed, evocative memoirs of their own.

Using the medium of photography, students will create a visual history of themselves, their family, community, and school.

Strategies

This unit encompasses four curricular areas—mathematics, literacy, social studies and visual arts. Consequently, a variety of strategies will be used throughout.

To begin the unit, students will work in groups creating silent mind maps on chart paper that will identify prior knowledge and beliefs concerning the nature of history and how we learn about the past. Groups will synthesize their results and report out to the class. The class results will be recorded and revisited at the end of the unit. The maps will be stored to be revisited as well. At the end of the unit, students will repeat the activity and then compare, contrast and discuss the results.

Once the unit has been introduced, students will begin discussing and creating their questionnaires. They will conduct their research, then collect and represent the data using graphing software or hand crafted graphs. They will be required to explain their findings in a written report that will be presented to the class.

Throughout the unit students will be reading and writing in a variety of genres. The primary focus of their reading will be memoir. Students will identify the characteristics of the genre by analyzing and discussing shared readings. Through a shared writing exercise, the teacher will work with the class and model writing a memoir. Students will then craft memoirs of their own and will follow the writing process to revise and edit their work.

For their photographic work, students will become familiar with all features and capabilities of the camera—primarily through teacher instruction. Students will view slides of photographs and paintings and discuss composition and technique. Students will have the opportunity to discuss photography with a visiting artist. Because writing and photography so closely parallel one another, students will learn to compose their pictures in much the same way they craft their writing—taking into account such elements as focus, content, main idea, setting, and symbols.

Finally, students will publish their work in a gallery format, using the school's atrium. Other classes will be invited to view the work and students will act as "docents" for the visiting groups, explaining the work and the background. The product of the unit will be published in book form and donated to the library.

Classroom Activities

The Data—History By and Through the Numbers

Objectives:

Students will:

- Create a statistical portrait of themselves at this time in history

- Become aware of how numbers can describe who they are
- Realize numbers don't tell the whole story
- Develop an awareness of the usefulness of math in other curricular areas by:
 - Collecting and describing data
 - Constructing and interpreting graphs
 - Making inferences and arguments based on their analysis of the data

Materials: Copies and transparency of *Left-Handed* experiment, transparency of exemplary student response to the *Left-Handed* experiment, copies and transparency of relevant data set, chart paper, computer with graphing software (optional), compasses, rulers, markers

Lesson I

If students have not had a great deal of experience with the real work of data collection and analysis, begin with lessons that take students through the recognizable phases of the process as well as emphasize the significance of each. These lessons should also highlight and elaborate some key concepts surrounding data collection and analysis such as:

- What questions to ask?
- What is sampling?
- What does “typical” mean?
- How do you represent what you collected—what format would best show the ideas?
- What is the meaning/significance of the information?
- To whom will you communicate this information?

An excellent initial lesson to try is *The Left Handed Experiment* created by Marilyn Burns (68). By taking a sample of students in their school, students will determine approximately how many right-handed people there are for every left-handed person. The author also provides extensions that can be used to piggyback on the processes and concepts.

The most important factor of data analysis is the discussion and reflection. At the conclusion of this introductory lesson—it is important to take the time to debrief. Ask students to consider:

- Was their question clear?
- Did they think of another question that might have been better?
- Was the sample truly representative?
- What led them to organize the data as they did?
- What did the data tell you?
- How can this data be of use?

The lesson concludes by asking students to prepare a report describing the data. At this point it would be very useful to have a sample of student work or a teacher prepared response to show students. Using a transparency and the overhead, discuss with students

the type of information to be included, the aspects they could consider discussing, and the proper way to communicate their findings using the language of mathematics.

Lesson II

Prologue:

Introducing the investigation

Provide students with a copy of a data set that is relevant to them (i.e. Bed Times, TV Watching, etc.).

Give an introduction/overview of the data and ask the students to look more closely at it. Ask them what they notice about the data and to describe it in as much detail as possible.

Since it will be data that has meaning to them and their age group, ask them if they think this represents the results their class would give.

Pick a topic from the data and ask students to frame a question around it and to determine how to collect the data. If necessary, clarify any particulars about the situation depicted in the question.

Collect data from the class. Record it quickly in a line plot.

Ask students what their data set shows about them as a class.

Have students compare their data with the original data and analyze the similarities and differences.

Launch:

Explain the focus of the investigation to students.

Begin with questions such as:

- What kind of information about our class would give people information about us?
- If you were going to meet a class of 5th graders in another school, in another city, or country, what would you like to know about them?

As a class, brainstorm the questions that students would want to ask and list questions on the board or chart paper. These will become the basis of a survey students will conduct.

Have students discuss the questions. Will they give an observer an idea of who you are as a class? Are there others that come to mind? Can certain questions be re-phrased/re-worded to be more revealing?

Once students have evaluated questions, have them decide on a format for the questions and the answers. Will they create a multiple choice answer set; will they want an open-ended response.

Remind students to consider the question of sampling. Will they ask everyone in the class? Will they get a big enough sample to draw any conclusions? Should the other fifth grade classes be surveyed?

Once students have decided on the questions and the answer format, prepare the surveys, copy and distribute them. Students will begin the process of collecting the data.

Lesson III

Analysis and Reporting:

Taking a look at the data and deciding what it all means

Once students have completed the collection of the data, group students into teams or partnerships.

Assign each team a question and give them all the class responses to that question. (This can be done by cutting apart the surveys and giving each team the responses to that question).

Students will then choose a graph format and use it to represent their findings.

Note: There are several computer programs that will create the physical graph once the data has been entered. Teachers may choose to use this feature and shorten the time spent on crafting the graph so that more time can be devoted to the actual analysis of the data.

Students will, in their small groups or teams, discuss the data. What does it say about the class? What conclusions can they draw from the data? What could be the reasons for the outcomes? They will then create a report of their findings and present it to the class.

Make all the data and the student reports available to the class. Have students categorize and synthesize the data and create a final report that they feel represents who they are as a class.

As a possible extension, students could survey other 5th grade classes and compare and contrast the data and draw conclusion.

Memoir

Memoir is an act of writing frozen in a unique time and place.

~William Zinsser

Objectives:

- Students will become familiar with the genre of memoir through listening to and reading a variety of memoir and memoir like pieces of literature
- Students will learn the format/form of writing memoir. They will understand what goes into a memoir, what stays out, and what makes a memoir meaningful for themselves and their readers

- Students will write a memoir that reflects their lives at this particular time and place in history. Students will follow the writing process guidelines and the five elements of effective writing as established by the Pennsylvania Department of Education.

Lesson I

What is a memoir?

Rather than begin with a definition of the genre, students will begin their study by listening to a short memoir read aloud. They will then respond, in writing, to the selection using, as Lucy Calkins notes, "literature to ignite memories."

Student should be encouraged to consider and write about what memory the piece brings to their mind; how /in what way do they connect to it.

Students would continue in this manner for 2-3 sessions.

(Note: Since this would be part of the ongoing writers' workshop already established in the classroom, responses to this and all other writing around the genre would be contained in their writer's notebooks. If this were to be a separate unit, then it might be useful to provide students with a spiral notebook or other notebook dedicated solely to this work/unit.)

Telling Our Own Stories

Students would then move onto telling stories about their own lives

Sitting in a circle either on the rug or around the room, students would tell about their own moments. Since it isn't always easy for students to get beyond the simple narration "...and then we did..." they will need encouragement in fleshing out the memories through guiding questions, asking for them to give more details to help listeners picture the scene, their thoughts and emotions..

These stories and the details become what Lucy Calkins calls 'touchstone moments' to which the teacher can later refer students to as they are writing their memoir to help them think and write more deeply.

Practicing With Models

After students had heard a number of selections, they would write using their own memories using the structure of a particular memoir. Calkins suggests a selection from Paul Auster's *The Invention of Solitude* as a particularly effective piece for this exercise.

What Resonates for Students? Reading and Writing Independently

Finally, students would read lengthy selections of memoir independently and decide for themselves what moments “resonate” for them and respond in their writer’s notebooks.

Memoir or Autobiography?

At this point in the genre study, students would be encouraged to bring in texts and picture books for the class (whole class or groups) to examine, analyse, and decide: Is it a memoir? Why or why not?

Lesson II

Memoir is not about the whole head of hair, but about one or two strands of the hair. (J. Little)

In these lessons, students will begin their work of writing in the form of memoir by focusing on “one or two strands of hair”.

Students will look at their lives—the things around them, the people, their experiences—and write in detail about them.

They may choose: a photograph, a special place, or a meaningful object and write journal entries about it. Their writings should answer the questions: How does this explain my life? How does this tell who I am? How does this fit into the “whole” of my life? How does this get across the “whole” of my life?

The teacher should begin the process by modeling the writing on the overhead. For example, if you choose photo, make an overhead transparency and talk aloud as you write the stories that flow from the picture.

To gather more material for their memoir, students could make timelines of particular “strands” of their lives. Each tick of the timeline can evoke countless stories (Zinsser 212). William Zinsser notes, “The physical act of writing is a powerful search mechanism. I’m often amazed, dipping into my past, to find some wholly forgotten incident clicking into place just when I need it” (212). For example a student could create a timeline of his/her relationship with an older sibling. The teacher will model this generative strategy so that students can see how this can generate a whole host of memories and stories.

“The secret of the art is detail. Any kind of detail will work—a sound, a smell, a song title, the topography or climate of the place known as home.” For many students, our urgings to “write with more detail” do not yield a great result. But, as Zinsser notes, “the detail is everything to a memoir” (213).

To help students pull the details from their stories one of the strategies they may use is what Lucy Calkins refers to as “writing it long” (422).

Students take an entry from their notebooks and work consciously to write it much longer. The entry should include conversation, interior monologue, thoughts, emotions, physical details of the setting—whatever can be included in order to elaborate the entry.

Jean Little has another suggestion. She says, “memoir comes, not only from our memories, but also from our imaginations. I lace memories together with fictional bits when memory doesn’t give me what I need” (423). For example, “If we recall an episode that happened in early spring, we recreate the setting by drawing on all the early springs we’ve ever known” (423).

Another strategy students find helpful is to see how other students do it. Create an overhead transparency with the before and after entries of one or two students and discuss the differences students observe.

Similarly, display on the overhead a short, unimproved student text and, as a class, decide how we could peer edit to help the student lift the quality of the writing with greater, more specific details.

Lesson III

Writing the Memoir

Students will begin by choosing an entry from their notebooks that is particularly significant to them. Have students outline all that could be included in the draft using a memoir form they chose.

Students can work from their entries and outlines to create their first drafts. Students will peer edit, conference with the teacher, make revisions, and type their final drafts.

Completed memoirs will be shared with the class. All writings will be collected as an anthology and presented to the library along with the accompanying photographs.

The Pictures

“Snapshots comprise our private and semi-public history.”

~Linda Ewald

Objectives:

Students will:

- Create a photographic history of themselves, their family, community, and their school
- Learn how to take good pictures through writing and analyzing photographic images

Materials: Digital cameras, projector for computer, overhead projector and transparencies, mats (optional), black construction paper, glue, illustration of the camera's features (copy for each student and transparency for overhead)

Note: Digital cameras are best for this project for a number of reasons:

- They allow for a greater degree of freedom of expression—students can take as many pictures as they want or need without worrying about the cost and delay of developing the photos.
- They can be easily downloaded onto the computer and displayed for discussion.
- They can produce pictures on black and white, sepia or color.

Digital cameras are not as easily obtainable as SLR cameras.

The school cameras can be used for much of the project. Students' family cameras can be used for parts of the project dealing with home and the community. It will be necessary to inform parents about the project and to ascertain that students do indeed have parental permission to use the camera.

A selection of interesting photographs that are filled with details and have a story to tell (see Google images) download your selections and put them into a Powerpoint presentation.

Lesson I

Before taking photos, begin by looking at them and talking about how they communicate an idea

Read the Photos

Have students examine the details of a photo and describe what they see

Make a list of all the things they see

Ask questions about the objects in the picture

Imagine what is happening outside of the picture frame

Look at the geographical and historical setting

Where was the picture taken? When? Have things changed?

What is the picture trying to tell us about the community?

As the details are identified and shared, a story begins to take shape collaboratively told by us and the photographer. This is much like the process identified by Louise Rosenblatt as transacting with the text.

This process helps students to begin to see that photographs are not just the images. They are stories. This understanding will help students plan their own meaningful photographs

Lesson II

Discuss what a portrait is:

- How is it different from a snapshot?
- How does it tell us something essential about a person?

Look at portraiture throughout history—paintings and photos:

- Have students observe how the details and lack of details reveal the person
- Discuss how portraits are not everything from head to toe
- Reference Jean Little’s description of a memoir as, “not the whole head of hair, just a few hairs”

Writing – Source material for the portraits

Before setting students off to photograph, have them write about themselves. This is a very open assignment – students can consider any number of aspects of their lives. The goal of the writing at this point is to create what Ewald refers to as “source material for the photos”. Photography, like good writing is very focused and this assignment helps students get at the details of their subject/topic. Have students share their writing with the class.

Before Taking The Pictures

Before Students begin using their cameras:

Use an illustration of the camera (from the manual) to familiarize students with the camera and its features. Make sure they know all the things the camera can do – telephoto, wide-angle, flash, etc.

Point out that the camera can switch from black and white, to sepia, to color

Ewald suggests that prior to any picture taking, students practice looking through the lens of a camera.

For this exercise, have students cut a small rectangle (this would be the view finder) out of a piece of paper and use it as they would a camera.

Students carry this with them throughout the day and look through it for every possible photo opportunity. This will help them be aware of what they can and can’t see so that their actual photos will have greater detail and stronger sense of composition.

Now You Can go Take Pictures

Students will describe/plan the photos they will take.

At this point, they should decide if they will use black and white, sepia, or color for their prints.

Students will photograph themselves, creating as many pictures as they chose and will download them to a specific file in their computer

Note: As a practical matter, shooting a self -portrait can be a problem. How can you be in two places at a time- behind the camera and in front?

Students can use the arms outstretched method, or they can have a helper. If they chose a helper, they must make sure to frame the picture first.

As a class, view the portraits of several student volunteers. Discuss what makes them effective. Ask students if they think the portraits could be improved. If so, discuss how. Have students print and mat the photos. If mats are not available, mount pictures on black construction paper with black borders. The mounted pictures will be displayed at the conclusion of the project.

Extensions

Still-life self-portraits

Discuss what a still-life is. Show students picture of paintings or photographs of this genre. Students may chose to make photos of objects that tell something about themselves

Writing After the Fact

Ask students to pick one of their portraits and write about it . What did they notice about the picture? What do they think the picture tells about them? Did the picture come aout as they had planned? If not, how is it different?

Lesson III

“Perhaps the most distinctive feature about photography is the way it freezes a fraction of a second.”

~W. Ewald

Photography and Writing—Parallel modalities

Through a pair of photographic exercises, students will develop a stronger sense of storytelling using their camera

Have class identify something around them that is noticeably changing- the lunchroom, the playground, the sun against a wall

Have each student in turn take a picture of the scene from the same spot.(Use one camera for this series of pictures.)

Lay the pictures out in sequence and have the students observe the changes over time. Discuss the changes and how this sense of timing in the photo can change the mood or feel of the composition.

Point of View

Photographers and writers choose a vantage point from which to tell a story.

The usual perspective of a picture is through the view finder taken at eyelevel. How might changing the perspective alter how we think of the subject.

Have students pick a stationary object to photograph – book, desk, bike, etc. Make a list of all the ways it could be photographed – sideways, bird’s eye view, angled, etc. and describe how they think it would change.

Take the photographs

Choose a volunteer’s pictures to project and discuss the effects of the differing points of view. How do they alter our thoughts and perceptions of the object.

Lesson IV

Part I: Family

Students will take pictures that depict their family

Begin with a writing assignment. Students will describe their families. What are they like? Who are you closest to? Who do you argue with most? What do you do together? How do you spend your time apart?

Using their writing as a point of departure, students will make a list of the possible photos they will try to take.

Students will take the photos and print them
Share photos with the class

Part II: Community

Students will begin by writing about their community “as if describing it to someone living on the other side of the world.” Ewald

Students then create a list of everything they can think of in their community – the laundromat, the pizza shop, the lady with the greyhound and so on.

Students make two additional lists – likes and dislikes
From these lists, they chose any item and begin a more detailed list of symbols and objects that relate directly to that list item

Have students plan what they think their photos might look like. Then, using their lists and plans, they should go out and begin photographing.

Print photos and then have students arrange their own pictures in any meaningful way: in sequence, groupings, or as a collage

(For the final culminating activity, students will, as a group, choose the pictures they think are most representative/evocative of their community and decide among themselves on the best way to display the work.)

Students will create captions for the pictures or a short narrative.

Part III: School

Students will create a photographic essay of a day in the life of their school.

Students will begin by reflecting on their experience of school. What is it like for them to be here? How is it different from any other school experience? What do they like about it? What do they dislike? What is their favorite room/area? Favorite activity.

Explain to students that they will be taking pictures of all aspects of the school all through the day.

Note: Discuss the project with administration and the other teachers and staff to make sure that students can have access to the building throughout the school day.

As a class, discuss when they will take their pictures – Will it be at 45-minute intervals as classes change? Will their pictures be candid shots or posed or a combination of the two? Bring up concerns such as the least obtrusive way to enter a classroom: asking permission to come in, getting students to cooperate, etc.

Team students in pairs or trios. Each team will then brainstorm the shots they would like to take—locations, times, classes, activities. They will hand in their list for approval prior to taking their pictures.

(It's wise to review proposed shots to ascertain that all aspects of the school will be covered.)

Remind students of the elements of photography they have learned such as: framing, point of view, time, portraits, story telling, and symbols.

Send students out to take their pictures.

Students will then print their pictures and create captions for them

Teams will decide on the best format to display their work and complete it.

Finished products will be shared with the class.

For the final product, students will chose representative pieces from all the work,decide on a presentation format, and complete it..

Culminating Activity

All the pieces should come together to create the picture that tells the history of this class. Following are two possible ways to display student work.

Create a gallery space outside the classroom, inside the library, near the office- any place where the work will be most visible.

Arrange the work as it progressed: Data collection and results- graphs and reports; memoir accompanied by self-portrait; collage of community, and photographic essay of the school.

Students will write a narrative explaining the goals of the project.

Students could take their photographs and download them onto iMovie format along with captions. They would choose music to accompany their photos and intersperse it with voiceovers from their writings.

Pennsylvania State Standards Addressed in This Unit

Mathematics

- 2.4 Mathematical Reasoning and Connections
 - 2.4F Use statistics to quantify issues (e.g. social studies)
- 2.6 Statistics and Data Analysis
 - 2.6A Organize and display data using pictures, tallies tables, charts
bar graphs and circle graphs
 - 2.6E Construct and defend conclusions based on data

Social Studies

- 8.3 United States History
 - Standard Statement: Why Study History?
 - Focus Question: How Do We Learn About History?
 - A.1 Primary Documents, Materials, and Historical Places

Literacy

- 1.1 Learning to Read Independently
 - 1.1A Establish the purpose for reading a type of text before reading
 - 1.1B Select texts for a particular purpose
 - 1.1G Demonstrate after reading understanding and interpretation of text
- 1.2 Reading Critically in All Areas
 - 1.2C Produce work in at least one literary genre that follows the conventions
of the genre

- 1.3 Reading, Analyzing & Interpreting Literature
 - 1.3A Read and understand works of literature
 - 1.3C Describe how the author uses literary devices to convey meaning
- 1.4 Types of Writing
 - 1.4A Write poems, plays, and multi paragraph stories including narrative and memoir
- 1.5 Quality of Writing
 - 1.5A Write with sharp, distinct focus, identifying topic, task and audience
 - 1.5B Use well developed content appropriate for the topic
 - 1.5C Write with controlled and/or subtle organization
 - 1.5E Revise writing to improve organization, word choice, order and precision of vocabulary
 - 1.5F Edit writing using the conventions of language

Visual Arts

- 1.1 Understand and Apply Art Media, Techniques and Processes
 - 1.1A Select and use materials, techniques, and processes to communicate ideas, experiences, and stories
 - 1.1C Use materials in a safe and responsible manner
- 1.2 Demonstrate Knowledge of Elements, Principles and Expressive Features from Diverse Historical Periods and Cultures
 - 1.2A Describe, analyze, and evaluate characteristics of elements, principles and styles of art.
 - 1.2B Use, analyze, and evaluate elements, principles and styles of art to communicate ideas and experiences
- 1.3 Recognize, Select and Evaluate a Variety of Subject Matter Symbols and Ideas From Diverse Cultures and Historical Periods
 - 1.3A Identify and discuss subject matter, symbols, and ideas that visual images communicate
- 1.6 Use the Visual Arts and Artifacts as a Way of Understanding Ourselves and Our Community
- 1.7 Understand the Interconnection Between Visual Arts and All Disciplines