

American Literature:
“Exploration of Identity and
Diversity

Life Learning Academy Project-Based Curriculum

Project Title: *I Am . . .* An Exploration of Identity and Diversity in an American Literature Class

Project Design Team and/or Instructors: Park Guthrie, English Teacher

Subject Areas: American Literature

Grade Level (s): 9-12

Project Overview:

This unit took place in an American Literature class which had a Reading Workshop component four days a week. During this unit, students chose one of three books to read during Reading Workshop times in class. Each of the books (two autobiographies and a novel) had biracial protagonists struggling with questions of identity: *Dreams of My Father* by Barack Obama and *The Color of Water* by James Mc Bride and *Caucasia* by Danzy Senna. As students were working through these texts independently, during whole class literature time, we read selections and watched the video version of August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson*. A major theme in *The Piano Lesson* is also the role heritage and family history plays in how individuals construct their own identity.

Students had opportunities to explore these themes and questions in three forums--- Socratic Seminars, weekly Bookletters, and a workshop given by trainers from the Multiethnic Education program.

This unit aimed to give students new vocabulary and conceptual paradigms to grapple with questions of race and identity, empowering them to play a more proactive role in choosing how to identify themselves.

Educational Standards Addressed:

English-Language Arts - Reading

3.0 Literary Response and Analysis

Students read and respond to historically or culturally significant works of literature that reflect and enhance their studies of history and social science. They conduct in-depth analyses of recurrent themes. The selections in *Recommended Literature, Kindergarten Through Grade Twelve* illustrate the quality and complexity of the materials to be read by students.

Structural Features of Literature

3.1 Analyze characteristics of subgenres (e.g., satire, parody, allegory, pastoral) that are used in poetry, prose, plays, novels, short stories, essays, and other basic genres.

Narrative Analysis of Grade-Level-Appropriate Text

3.2 Analyze the way in which the theme or meaning of a selection represents a view or comment on life, using textual evidence to support the claim.

3.5 Analyze recognized works of American literature representing a variety of genres and traditions:

- b. Contrast the major periods, themes, styles, and trends and describe how works by members of different cultures relate to one another in each period.
- c. Evaluate the philosophical, political, religious, ethical, and social influences of the historical period that shaped the characters, plots, and settings.

3.7 Analyze recognized works of world literature from a variety of authors:

- b. Relate literary works and authors to the major themes and issues of their eras.
- c. Evaluate the philosophical, political, religious, ethical, and social influences of the historical period that shaped the characters, plots, and settings.

Speaking

2.1 Deliver reflective presentations:

- a. Explore the significance of personal experiences, events, conditions, or concerns, using appropriate rhetorical strategies (e.g., narration, description, exposition, persuasion).
- b. Draw comparisons between the specific incident and broader themes that illustrate the speaker's beliefs or generalizations about life.
- c. Maintain a balance between describing the incident and relating it to more general, abstract ideas.

Project Objectives:

- (1) Students will reflect on a variety of factors which influence how they choose to identify themselves.
- (2) Students will participate in a student-led discussion concerning race, diversity, and identity.
- (3) Students will participate in a student-led discussion of an important dramatic work of 20th century American literature.
- (4) Students will create a free verse poem for an audience of their peers.
- (5) Students will be able to recognize common myths or misunderstandings about race and identity.
- (6) Students will write four letters exploring themes, characters, and situations of a novel, autobiography, or drama.

Student Expected Outcomes:

- (1) Students will be able to articulate three ways they construct their own identities or three factors that influence who they consider themselves to be.
- (2) Students will be able to make inferences about characters in a play and be able to refer to specific evidence (actions or words) to support these assertions.
- (3) Students will write free verse poems relating to their identities.

- (4) Students will be able to recognize common myths or misunderstandings about the biological basis for racial identity.
- (5) Students will use the terms heritage and identity in a discussion of the play *The Piano Lesson*.
- (6) Students will write about a protagonist of a novel or autobiography.

Texts and Supplemental Instructional Materials:

Useful Websites:

<http://www.multiethniceducation.org/> Contact information for Multiethnic Education trainers and to purchase *My People Are. . .* DVD's.

<http://www.journeytoexcellence.org/practice/instruction/theories/miscideas/socratic/> Overview of Socratic Seminar theory and practice. Includes pages with rubrics.

Atwell, Nancy (1998) *In The Middle: New Understanding About Writing, Reading, and Learning*. 2nd Edition. Heineman Publishers. Portsmouth, NH.

Canady, R. and Rettig, M., editors (1996) *Teaching in the Block: Strategies for Engaging Active Learners*. Eye on Education, Larchmont, NY. Pages 24-69.

McBride, James (1996) *The Color of Water: A Black Man's Tribute to his White Mother*. Riverhead Books, New York, NY.

Obama, Barack (2004) *Dreams of My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance*. Three Rivers Press, New York, NY.

Senna, Danzy (1998) *Caucasia*. Riverhead Books. New York, NY.

Wilson, August (1990) *The Piano Lesson*. Penguin Books USA. New York, NY.

Lesson # Standard #	Content Outline	Teaching Sequence	Equipment and Materials	Preparation	Assessment
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I Am...An Exploration of Identity in an American Literature Class Outline

<p>1</p> <p>Speaking 2.1</p>	<p>Introduction to Unit</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Have students freewrite for 5 minutes about the word “heritage”. 2. At the end of the freewriting period have students underline one or two sentences they wish to share with the entire class. (Students may also opt to “pass”). 3. Assemble students in Socratic Seminar format (desks in a circle, teacher outside of circle). Appoint a discussion leader. Explain that this is a mini-Socratic Seminar and not a full length one. Explain that students will have a full length Socratic Seminar after they complete their Independent Reading books and view <i>The Piano Lesson</i>. 4. Students begin the discussion with a Once Around (each student reads the underlined sentences from their freewrites with no discussion or questions in between). 5. Students discuss issues raised during Once Around. 6. When the student discussion leader deems it is appropriate, the discussion leader poses questions on question cards. Questions on question cards are: <i>What is the difference between race and culture? Where do you get your “race”? Where do you get your culture? What is your</i> 	<p>Journal or binder paper</p> <p>Socratic Seminar question cards</p>	<p>Write out Socratic Seminar question cards</p>	<p>Freewrites</p> <p>Teacher notes of discussion</p>
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		<p><i>identity? What role does your heritage play in shaping your identity? Who decides your identity? What role does race play in your identity? What does it mean to be multiethnic? In which ways do societal forces limit or constrain the identities of multiethnic people?</i></p>			
<p>2 Literary Response and Analysis 3</p>	<p>Students Read Independent Reading Book with Multiethnic Protagonist during Reading Workshop Times</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Students read silently in class 20 minutes a day, four times a week. 2. The teacher records their progress each day. 3. Students type one book letter each week in which they briefly summarize their week's reading AND give their reaction to it. 4. Teacher responds to each book letter. 5. Every second week, students address the booklet to students reading other novels. Students respond to each other. 	<p>Student computers</p>	<p>Respond to student bookletters from the previous week.</p>	<p>Student Bookletters Record of student reading</p>
<p>3 Literary Response and Analysis 3.5</p>	<p>Reader's Theater Performance of the Opening Scene of <i>The Piano Lesson</i>.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Assign student readers and roles. Allow the group of student readers to spend Independent Reading time preparing for a dramatic reading of the opening scene, rather than doing Independent Reading with the rest of the class. 2. Have the class watch as the students do a Reader's Theater performance of the opening scene of <i>The Piano Lesson</i>. 3. Debrief the reading with a combination of factual recall/clarification questions, character analysis questions, and 	<p>Five copies of <i>The Piano Lesson</i></p>	<p>Choose performers</p>	<p>Reader's Theater performance of scene</p>

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		predictions. At the conclusion of this discussion, give biographical information about the author August Wilson, as well as the historical context of the story.			
3 Literary Response and Analysis 3.5	View <i>The Piano Lesson</i>, Acts I and II	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Show Acts I and II of the <i>The Piano Lesson</i>. 2. Have the students write a booklet to the teacher about the first half of the video. Each booklet should also include a connection or comparison between the characters, situations, and/or themes of <i>The Piano Lesson</i> and the students' Independent Reading Book. 	DVD/TV	Rent <i>The Piano Lesson</i> DVD	Student Bookletters
4 Literary Response and Analysis 3.5	View conclusion of <i>The Piano Lesson</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Show the conclusion of <i>The Piano Lesson</i>. 2. Have students write another booklet in which they compare and contrast protagonists from <i>The Piano Lesson</i> with the protagonist from their independent reading book. 	DVD/TV	Rent <i>The Piano Lesson</i> DVD	Student Bookletters
4 Literary Response and Analysis 3.1, 3.2, 3.5, 3.7 Speaking 2.1	Socratic Seminar about <i>The Piano Lesson</i> and Multiethnic Novels	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To prepare for the Once Around at the opening of the Socratic Seminar, students write three one-sentence self-descriptions of three different people: (a) the protagonist from their Independent Reading Book, (b) a protagonist from <i>The Piano Lesson</i>, (c) themselves. 2. Appoint a student leader. For the Once Around, students read their three one-sentence self-descriptions. 3. At the conclusion of the Socratic Seminar, 	Binder paper	Write out Socratic Seminar question cards	Socratic Seminar Teacher Notes Pre-Seminar Writing Post-Seminar Writing

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		students write for 20 minutes elaborating on themes raised during the seminar and reflecting on their participation in the seminar.			
5	My People Are . . . Training by Multiethnic Education Program	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Trainers from the Multiethnic Education Program run workshop titled <i>My People Are . . .</i> 2. Introductions and Ground Rules 3. Facts and Myths about Race and Identity 4. View <i>My People Are...DVD</i> 5. Discussion about film 6. Poetry Writing 7. Sharing Poems 	DVD/TV <i>My People Are . . .DVD</i>	Arrange for visit from Multiethnic Education Program Trainers	My People Are . . .Poems Workshop Feedback Forms