

Biography/Autobiography: History through the lives of history-makers then and now

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“Harriet Tubman and I have a lot in common, we went through the same situations. Like people trying to bring us down with words. We fought for what was right, and tried to make people understand what they’re doing wrong. We may have lived in a different time line but we still have our things in common.”

Zuhaly

Before my recent retirement, I taught fifth grade Sheltered English Immersion (SEI) in a large urban school district in Massachusetts. In 2002, when voters passed a ballot measure restricting bilingual education and mandating English-only immersion, the scaffolding from bilingual education was done away with. The result of this legislation has had an adverse effect on educational access for English Language Learners (ELL). Drop out rates for ELL students are currently three-times higher and MCAS test scores show a persistent achievement gap than that of non-ELLs.

Some of my students had been in school, in segregated settings, since kindergarten. All spoke only Spanish at home. Most were of the second generation (born in the US) and witnessed the change from bilingual education to the sheltered program. In addition to segregation in their classroom setting, these students ate at a separate lunch table and had recess separately to accommodate the school schedule, according to the principal. This separation greatly limited their conversations with their English-speaking peers. Typically, students entered my classroom throughout the school year: one student arriving in September from Peru, one student arrived from the Dominican Republic in January, another in late February. These three students were learning in English for the first time. All of my students qualified for free or reduced lunch.

As a bilingual teacher, my attention turned to finding creative ways to make learning relevant for all of my Spanish-speaking students. I worked to arm my fifth-grade scholars not only with the skills to succeed in academic English but also the confidence in their own intellectual ability to counteract the experiences of racism and marginalization that they may experience along their educational journey.

Embedding new knowledge in the fabric of the everyday life of my immigrant students strengthens their academic identities by making student knowledge essential to the learning. The biography autobiography project builds a direct bridge from the biography of a character from early American history to specific moments in the biographer's life. My goal is to use reading and writing to foster a deep understanding of social studies concepts such as: everyday people's relationship to history; that family stories, beliefs and values form part of the social, political and economic conditions of a society and that who we are and what we do shapes history. At the same time my students will learn to read for information and determine important ideas by gathering facts that respond to their own research questions. These skills prepare scholars to think critically about the presentation US history from a deep place of knowing.

The student work in this essay includes samples from one student in her third year in US schools and a second student who has been in the school for six years. These two fifth-graders represent a range of abilities and experiences. One student, Zuhaly, loves to write and sees herself as a "writing coach" among her peers. I selected a second student, Fenelí, because his oral language issues bring to the fore what I think are the major challenges facing all of my bilingual students: sorting language structures from the family language, neighborhood English and the English of school. My favorite moments during this project: timeline buddies, the

turning-point-moment pop-up books and the biographers celebration capture my attempts to scaffold the writing process.

Independence Connection

Crispus Attucks was a good man. He respects people. He helped people who were in danger. He loved people. I am like that too. For example, everyone knows that Crispus was the first soldier to give his life for independence.

*One day my friend Carlos was having trouble with getting the **dash facts**. I showed him how I was doing my work. I wanted him to do a good job like everyone else is going to do. It was simple. I just showed him how I wrote my dash facts in my writers notebook.*

Now, my friend Carlos is doing a very good job. He is not asking for help anymore. He said thank you to me. This is not really as big as Crispus Attucks gave his life. But, I gave some help to my friend Carlos so he could work independently.

from Crispus Attucks: Fighter for Independence by Fenelí

Writing is a gateway to English.

The mid-year writing assessment involved a response to the reading of Coming Home, from the life of Langston Hughes. In this way, I highlighted the qualities of a good biography, building background knowledge for the writing project to follow. Their written response to the reading revealed that my students need to work on idea development, structuring effective paragraphs and transitions between paragraphs.

I used sheltering strategies to enhance the quality of the biographical writing. My various approaches engaged my students in generative (not reiterative) writing in response to reading for information. Asking them to make personal connections to their research subjects demanded an original response from the writers. Collecting dash facts in their writers' notebooks; meeting with their timeline buddies to review and revise their work; then pulling them off the page with the

pop-up book are three strategies that bring the reading and writing process to life. The project culminated celebration of their work for the families in our neighborhood library and university.

Students began their research by reading books, visiting the library and gathering electronic information gathered by web searches. Our classroom book collection includes representation of the lives of women, American Indians, African Americans, Latinos as well as presidents and military leaders. The selection of the protagonist for their biography is entirely their own. As they read, they organize the information as **dash facts** under a specific research question. These dash facts are turned into drafts in their writers' notebooks. I use dash facts not only to teach note-taking skills but also to counteract the tradition in our Spanish-speaking countries of copying text from the board. For this reason, I know that my students need support to transition to an original writing process.

Feneli's dash facts from his research on Crispus Attucks childhood

- CA was a colonial patriot
- born and raised in Framingham, Massachusetts
- born 1723 as a slave
- his dad was captured in Africa
- his mom was a member of the Natick Indian tribe
- his name Attucks means deer—a special animals to the Natick people
- Crispus means beauty and is a Christian name
- he dreamed of being a sailor

As the biography project begins to take shape the class gathers in a community meeting to develop a project completion check list that mirrors the writing process. **Gathering ideas**

check list includes research questions the biographers were thinking about: What was her/his childhood like; What problems did she/he face and overcome in life? What was life like in those days? Who were their heroes or role models? What are the connections between you and the person you researched? How does she/he inspire you for your future? Writers are required to dedicate a chapter to both the childhood and the connection questions. They could choose to develop as many as five or as few as three questions into full chapters.

The **developing ideas check list** includes these items: Gather at least 3 to 5 dash facts for each of your research questions. Use graphic organizer to turn your dash facts into paragraphs. Each paragraph must have a topic sentence, 3 to 5 supporting details, and a transition sentence linking paragraphs. Each chapter must have at least 5 paragraphs. Turn your questions into clever chapter titles. Select 3 features of non-fiction texts: Map, Photograph, Glossary, Index, Chronology for your biography.

As drafts began to take shape in their writers' notebooks, we pulled together this **revising/editing/publishing check list** includes: Check for developing ideas with your time line buddy. Reread and revise your drafts. *Lift a line* where you think you may need more details. Submit a second draft to the teacher for a conference review. Develop a dramatic role play of your character for the family celebration and share it with your time line buddy.

In addition, conversations about writing with their **timeline buddies** and with me deepened the writers' understanding of their own voice. I am a firm believer in the power of relationships in the learning process. In particular for my students, oral language was essential to written self-expression. Timeline Buddies were selected because the characters they were writing about lived at approximately the same time in history. The juxtaposition of the lives of



Crispus Attucks had a plan to make his dream come true. Crispus Attucks sneaks on a ship and got a job on a whaling boat. So, he became a very good sailor. Feneli

characters who lived at the same time but had vastly different lives due their status (race, gender, class) begin to surface social distance in American lives early in history.

Biographers met with their timeline buddies to review and revise their writing by listen to one another's drafts, ask clarifying questions in order to help one another develop ideas. As a result of these conferences buddies contributed to **word bank charts** organized by categories

such as nouns (names), verbs (actions), adjectives (descriptions) or topics (colors, feelings, textures, geographical locations). These large charts are always on display and are added to by writers as

their vocabulary expands.

The **pop-up book** is an example of a sheltering strategy with the use of illustration. Robert Shreefter, taught the bookmaking art to the students with both discipline and imagination. His humorous and personal engagement with the children's thinking and creativity elevated students academic and artistic identities simultaneously. In response to such a generous gift, only these sensitive biographers could have selected such small but gigantic moments in these American's lives. The students took ownership of the bookmaking art.

Selecting a turning point event for the pop-up book lifted the biographer's perspective off the page. In the artistry about that moment, the reader gets to meet both protagonist and writer. In the pop-up book, biographers were asked to explain why this was a remarkable moment with respect to their own lives.



At age 13, Harriet's owner grew tired of making her a house servant. He sent her where she needed to work as hard as a man. One day, her owner was chasing a slave who wanted to escape. The owner had a two-pound weight in his hand. When he was going to throw it, Harriet Tubman got in the way. The weight hit her on the forehead. All these events that happened during Harriet Tubman's childhood show that she was really caring and courageous. Zuhaly

Zuhaly's Harriet Defends a Friend or Feneli's Crispus Attucks Becomes a Sailor

crystallized both the meaning of lives interpreted by others and the children's own values and aspirations. We brought the student writing to audiences in our community. The writers dressed as the characters they had researched and prepared selected quotes to speak in a fishbowl conversation at the events. We invited families, faculty, and community folks to a publishing event that featured their pop-up book, the accompanying chapter book and delicious food prepared by the families. The community celebration was critically important to me as it pushed through the walls imposed on my students in school.

I have to ask: Did I succeed in make learning relevant for my students? I turned to my fifth-grade scholars to see what they have to say about this biography/autobiography project. Here are some of their comments:

"My favorite part was that I got to write in my own words and have fun with friends." Claritza

"I felt what they felt. To be in the shoes of that person is to be in that time." Feneli

"One thing that I have learned about good writing is grammar. Reading aloud, I can find the grammar." Zuhaly

"Doing the celebration in the library *representando* (representing) your character was my

favorite part. You could show your family members and your classmates what you have learned about your character.” Maricelis

These comments do expose a degree of confidence and enjoyment in their own ability to showcase what they have created. I am inspired by these courageous young writers to continue reading the world with the written word.

Resources

Curriculum Resource Guide: A Sharing of Arts Based Strategies for Learning

John Marshall Elementary School Dorchester, Massachusetts

Charles Sumner School Roslindale, Massachusetts

Creative Arts in Learning Division at Lesley University National Arts & Learning Collaborative (NALC) (<http://www.artsllearning.org/files/NEACurriculumResourceGuide.pdf>)

Cooper, Floyd and Hoel Cooper (1994). **Coming Home: From the Life of Langston Hughes** New York, NY: Putnam.

Reference

Departments of Justice and Education Reach Settlement with Boston Public Schools to Ensure Equal Opportunities for ELL Students. April 23, 2012

The Department of Justice and the Department of Education reached agreement with the Boston Public Schools (the district) and its superintendent today to ensure that English Language Learner (ELL) students in Boston receive the services and supports they need to overcome language barriers, as required by the Equal Educational Opportunities Act of 1974 and Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. This agreement replaces an interim settlement agreement entered on Oct. 1, 2010, which required the district to implement short-term remedies to ensure that thousands of students improperly excluded from the district’s ELL programs were promptly assessed and provided services.

<http://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/2012/April/12-crt-511.html>