

Langston Hughes
A Study of His Poetry for Elementary Students

Victoria Baumann
Fort Pitt Elementary School

Rationale

"Educators and the public are in frenzy over how to boost reading comprehension scores. In some school systems children fill out comprehension skill sheets again and again. In others, they struggle diligently through thick workbooks in an effort to improve their SAT scores. Neither approach teaches students to use strategies that will, in fact, help them understand texts better. Worse, neither approach develops the love of reading, the very engine that invites the student into a lifetime of reading."(1) This statement by Donald Graves, Professor Emeritus, University of New Hampshire was written in the foreword of a book I was reading for professional development and personal interest. The theme of the book was improving reading comprehension and vocabulary development. I have been searching furiously for the past ten years for methods that would create excitement for my students about reading and foster deeper understanding of what was read. Professor Graves' statement seemed to clarify the answer to a challenging question. Children will get better at understanding the complexities of text if they are permitted to interact with meaningful text in meaningful ways.

Objective

This unit was conceived from that goal. The objective is to raise achievement by raising interest and participation. If students remain actively engaged in reading, and respond to that reading through writing and discussion, their skill level will increase.

Overview

This curriculum unit is designed as an author study of Langston Hughes and a genre study of Poetry. The reading level and activities are geared toward intermediate primary or middle school (4th through 8th Grades). A Literacy Block that allows time for writing and reading instruction is recommended. The Language Arts instruction is designed in a two and a half-hour block. During this Literacy Block students engage in word study (phonics, Spelling and grammar), group/individual reading, oral reading, pair reading, author study, genre study, and writing instruction.

Writer's and Readers Workshop-

Writer's Workshop consists of a mini-lesson, student writing time and share time. Students utilize a writer's notebook and folder to collect their writing. The mini lesson is designed to enable students to use their own writing as practice for grammar and craft. Through their writer's notebook and folder, students continually revisit their own work. When a new skill such as

"repetition" or "strong beginnings" is introduced in the mini lesson students can use their own work as the blueprint. They can examine their pieces and identify the need for revision, using the mini lesson as their focus.

The Reader's Workshop is designed much in the way of the Writer's Workshop. The mini-lesson consists of oral reading (either by the teacher or a student) and a skill or concept (making predictions, cause and effect, character development). Students then read with a purpose or focus determined in the mini-lesson, and share with the group evidence of the skill or concept they found in their reading.

The Writer's and Reader's Notebook-

Writer's and Reader's notebooks can also have a positive influence over student's performance. They will be most beneficial if incorporated as part of the Language Arts routine. When students get in the habit of recording observations and ideas and are encouraged to carry the notebook with them, the benefits will be evident. When students keep journals or Writer's/Reader's notebooks they are able to preserve things they observe or ideas they have, even if these observations and ideas don't occur between 8:00am and 10:30 am. When students keep journals of characters or images from the books they've read, it reinforces the information twice, once when they read it and again when they write it. These notebooks also enable students to make text to text, text to self and text to world connections when they respond to literature.

The element of purpose is that which will have the most significant effect on the learning. Students are reading their own work which was written for a purpose and also making purposeful changes in word usage, craft elements, organization etc. This "active learning" accounts for more time on task for my students than any assertive discipline techniques I have tried. It is, I believe, because the tasks themselves and the satisfaction received by the students for their effort are powerful, positive reinforcement. This combination of "active reading" and purposeful response has shown to significantly improve comprehension in my fourth and fifth grade classroom. I base this statement on results of standardized, performance-based assessments and teacher designed assessments for fourth and fifth grade students at the same school over a ten-year period. I also have the opportunity to work with the same students for two concurrent school years. Through this process I am able to see significant growth from one year to the next and guide the second year's instruction from results of the first year.

Strategies

The study was designed so that the class would examine the same poem for both Writer's and Reader's Workshop. During Writer's Workshop the lesson includes an element of craft from the poem. Students work with that element and also free write in their notebooks, and the lesson closes with a sharing of student work.

During the Reader's Workshop the poem is read aloud not only by the teacher, but also by students, the group examines the work for meaning or structure and students have a chance to practice a poem for oral recitation.

The activities in this unit are written in narrative form and can be adapted to fit a variety of instructional methods. I use the Workshop method as part of my school's reform model, America's Choice. Professional development provided by the America's Choice reform model and my personal and professional reading led me to this design, which I have found successful.

Oral Reading

Most people would agree that oral reading is an important part of reading instruction. Students should have the opportunity to read aloud. This gives the student the chance to hear the cadence of their voice and their degree of fluency. It is also important for students to be read to. Many of my parents think that because the older child can read independently, that "story time" is no longer necessary. Listening to someone read aloud with inflection and fluency can be very engaging. Even my rowdiest student is silent during a reading of Waterfront Streets or Mother to Son, two of my favorite Langston Hughes' poems.

This lyrical quality of "every man's voice" is quite profound in the works of Langston Hughes. Many scholars and literary critics maintain that Langston Hughes, "took the high culture of literature and brought it to the people."(2) The language of a piece can have as much to do with its effectiveness as any other element. Pulitzer Prize winning author, Toni Morrison states, "I remember the language of the people I grew up with. Language was so important to them. All that power was in it. And grace and metaphor. Some of it was very formal and Biblical, because the habit is that when you have something important to say you go into parable, if you're from Africa, or you go into another level of language. I want to use language that way, because my feeling was that a black story was not black because I wrote it or because there were black people in it, or because it was about black things. It was the style."(3)

As mentioned earlier, it is vital to the impact and effectiveness of the unit that the teacher read one or two of Langston Hughes' poems aloud, daily. I have included a list of poems that are well suited for this on page 13. The level of student enthusiasm will be proportional to the level of instructor enthusiasm, and these oral recitations can fuel that enthusiasm.

Narrative of Langston Hughes to be used in Reader's/Writer's Workshop. This narrative on Langston Hughes is provided to give students some background information on the author and to stimulate discussion of how his life events shaped his writing. There are discussion questions provided at junctures throughout the narrative.

Langston Hughes was born on February 1, 1902 in Joplin, Missouri. He lived with his mother, Carrie Hughes and his grandmother, Mrs. Mary Leary Langston. His father, James Hughes, had left home for Mexico when Langston was a baby. He felt that his potential in the United States was limited because he was a Negro. When Langston was five years old he, his mother and grandmother left their home in Lawrence, Kansas to join James Hughes in Mexico. The visit did not last long. An earthquake destroyed the city and Carrie Hughes decided she and her son and mother could not live safely there. So, shortly after arriving in Mexico the three returned home. Langston did not get the chance to visit with his father and get to know him. His father did make his mother promise that Langston would return to Mexico when he was older.

Discussion questions and Geography Activity.

Reference Missouri, Kansas and Mexico on the classroom map. If there is availability, keep track of the places where Langston lived and traveled. The map can be referenced throughout the unit.

How do you think Langston felt when they left Mexico so abruptly?

Do you think he would rather stay in Mexico with his father or go back to the US to be with his mother?

Would Langston want his father to live outside the US so that he would not be burdened with the effects of racism or live with him and deal with the reality of racism in America?

Langston was very close to his mother and grandmother. He saw his college educated mother work as a maid and a waitress because of her color. Langston's grandmother was very proud of her people. She told Langston stories of his ancestors who were involved in politics and education. She also told Langston Bible stories and read passages from the Bible aloud to him. Langston grew up with this language in his head and heart. Eventually his mother did find a good job in Topeka, Kansas. She moved there with Langston. It was in this city that Langston discovered the Library and its Children's section. He spent much time in the library, often to escape teasing from classmates at his mostly white school. When Langston was twelve his grandmother died. He remembered that she had told him never to cry, but to laugh instead. He should never feel sorry for himself even when things were difficult. So when the ticket seller at the movie-theater told him she would not sell a ticket to a "colored boy" he found the Opera House. He honored his grandmother's memory by taking her advice and not feeling sorry for himself and letting anger get the best of him.

At the Opera House Langston could see the shows he had read about in the library.

Discussion Questions

What do you think about the advice Langston's grandmother gave him? Is it better to fight discrimination or find a way around it, even if that way isn't your first choice?

What effects would discrimination have on children's opinion of themselves?

Have you ever faced discrimination? How did it make you feel? What did you do about it?

When Langston was in eighth grade he joined his mother, her new husband and their new baby in Lincoln, Illinois. Again, he attended school with mostly white children. However, this experience was more positive. It was here that Langston became involved in poetry. He was voted class poet and asked to write and recite a poem at graduation. His mother had written and read poetry at the Interstate Literary Society, founded by his grandfather. Langston felt he could do this. His poem was well received and he was proud of his accomplishment. In 1916 Langston's family moved to Cleveland, Ohio and he attended Central High School. He was a good student and encouraged by his teachers to continue writing. Langston became interested in

the style of poetry known as free verse. His teacher told him that free verse was based on natural speech rhythms of language. He had heard free verse in the Bible passages of Song of Songs and the Psalms read to him by his grandmother. He began to read Carl Sandburg and write poetry regularly.

Discussion Questions

What is your opinion of moving around a lot? Would you rather live in the same place with lifelong friends with similar experiences or move often and have to start new?

Do you think people practice things because they are good at them or are they good at them because they practice a lot?

Would things have gone differently for Langston had his first poem not been well received? Why or why not?

Do you like to do things that you are not good at? How do you know when you are good at something?

Information about Free Verse Poetry

This information can be shared with students or used as a teacher resource. If students are familiar with other forms of poetry such as cinquain or limerick, free verse can be introduced as another poetry style with less defined rules about structure. Free verse is different from conventional verse because it has an irregular metrical pattern. It uses the cadence or natural word rhythms of speech. This is why oral reading of these poems is so vital. "T.S. Eliot's poem The Wasteland is an example of free verse where the pattern changes from line to line in accordance with the changing thought."(4)

When Langston was seventeen he did go back to Mexico to live with his father. At his father's urging Langston took up book keeping. His father insisted he work constantly. This left Langston little time to write or explore. After working a difficult schedule under his difficult father Langston took ill and returned home. He began writing again. He carried his notebook everywhere. He wrote in all his spare moments. After a few years Langston returned to Mexico. He wanted to go to college. Langston's father wanted him to study in Europe where skin color was not such an issue. Langston wanted to go to Columbia University in New York City. He and his father reached a compromise. Langston would attend Columbia, but study engineering. It was the early 1920's and Harlem, New York was fast becoming the place for young writers and performers of color to congregate and share their talents.

Discussion Questions

Why did Langston's father avoid the United States?

Are the father and son different from one another? Why or why not?

Make a prediction about Langston's experience studying Engineering at Columbia. (Think about what you already know about his interests).

Harlem was a fascinating place for a young writer of color. Langston met other young writers, such as Countee Cullen. Langston stopped studying Engineering at Columbia. He took a job on a ship. He wanted to explore what the world had to offer and was not content to spend so much time studying something that didn't interest him. He sailed to Africa, Holland and Paris. He returned to New York in 1924 with 25 cents in his pocket. His poem **The Weary Blues** won forty dollars in a contest sponsored by the magazine "Opportunity". He received an offer by a publishing company to publish a collection of his poems. He called this book **The Weary Blues** after his lucky poem. Langston enjoyed a prolific writing career during the Harlem Renaissance. By 1929 the Harlem Renaissance was coming to an end. The Stock Market crash of 1929 gave rise to The Great Depression, where most people were just struggling to get by. By this time Langston had become a celebrated writer. He was invited to Bethune-Cookman College to read his work and talk with students. This gave rise to speaking tours all over the country. He won the Harmon Award for his book **Not Without Laughter**. Langston spent most of his time reading his poetry to students and working with young writers all over the world. He entertained troops during World War II with readings. He maintained his home in Harlem because he loved the neighborhood and its people so much. Even though he traveled extensively Langston always saw Harlem as his home. He felt happiest when surrounded by writers, young and old. Langston died on May 22, 1967 at the age of 65.

Discussion Questions

What prediction did you make about Langston and his enrollment in Columbia's Engineering program? Was this prediction accurate? What did you base your prediction on?

Langston had lived in so many places, why do you think he considered Harlem his home?

Where do you think he got the name for his book **Not Without Laughter**? (Remember the advice his grandmother gave him).

Research Activities

The information included about the Harlem Renaissance could be used during Reader's Workshop. The dates provided are intended for use as a timeline so that the students can more clearly visualize these events and their relationship with one another. The timeline can serve as a work in progress much like the map, updating it as students gather more information about Langston Hughes and the events of his time.

Civil War- 1861-1865

President Abraham Lincoln passes the 13th Amendment abolishing slavery –1863

Langston Hughes is born – 1902

Harlem Renaissance – 1920-1929

The Stock Market Crash and the start of the Great Depression – 1929

During the 1920's Harlem, New York became a place of great activity for Negro writers and performers. The movement gave rise to great confidence and racial pride. Artists, writers and musicians gathered here to share experiences and provide mutual encouragement. Author, James Weldon Johnson, acted as a mentor to young Black writers such as Claude McKay and Countee Cullen. It was here that Langston met contemporary, Arna Bontemps and enjoyed the conversation and friendship of his peers. The Harlem Renaissance ended with the Stock Market Crash of 1929 and the start of the Great Depression, which left most Americans struggling to survive.

Encarta Research Topics

Students should be permitted to use on-line reference documents such as Encarta to conduct research. Some topics for research include- Arna Bontemps, Countee Cullen, Zora Neale Hurston, Harlem Renaissance, "The Crisis" "Opportunity" (two Negro magazines of the day), Stock Market Crash, NAACP, Carl Van Vechten. Students can gather information about these topics and illustrate their significance in the life of Langston Hughes.

Reading and Writing Activities

These activities can be used in both the Writer's and Reader's Workshop. There is a narrative for investigation by the class and accompanying writing activities.

The Blues

The Blues is an art form that has its roots in the African-American communities of the South. It is a combination of fieldwork hollers, chants, African rhythms and European ballads. The term "blue devils" was used by slaves in the South to describe feelings of sadness. The Blues has three main elements; an emotional state, harmony and structure. There are themes of hard times, disloyal friends, lost love and all things sad. Langston Hughes was one of the first writers to use this form in literature. Many people felt that the ordinary issues of the street did not mix with the high culture of literature. Langston did not agree. He used the language and structure of the Blues to write many poems. Two are included for study.

Lonesome Place

I got to leave this town.
It's a lonesome place.
Got to leave this town cause
It's a lonesome place.
A po', po' boy can't
Find a friendly face.

Goin' down to de river
Flowin' deep an' slow.
Goin' down to de river
Deep an' slow-
Cause there ain't no worries
Where de waters go.

I'm weary, weary,
Weary, as I can be.
Weary, weary,
Weary as can be.
This life's so weary,
'S' bout to overcome me.

Bound No'th Blues

Goin' down the road, Lawd,
Goin' down the road.
Down the road, Lawd,
Way, way down the road.
Got to find somebody
To help me carry this load.

Road's in front o' me,
Nothin' to do but walk.
Road's in front of me,
Walk...an' walk...an' walk.
I'd like to meet a good friend
To come along an' talk.

Hates to be lonely,
Lawd, I hates to be sad.
Says I hates to be lonely,
Hates to be lonely an' sad,
But ever friend you finds seems
Like they try to do you bad.

Road, road, road, O!
Road, road...road...road, road!
Road, road, road, O!
On the no'thern road.
These Mississippi towns ain't
Fit fer a hoppin' toad.

Discussion and Activities

Look at the poems with the students. Ask them to share what they observe about the setting, theme, language, and structure. The stanzas are organized with six lines each, there is significant repetition, and the author uses dialect. Why do you think he does this? Is slang always appropriate in writing?

Have students work in their writing notebooks to make a list of things that would make them sad. It is often helpful, especially if this is new territory that the class composes a Blues poem as a group. This can help to create excitement and clarify expectations for students. Celebrate class compositions. Publish them for staff, hang them in the hallway, do whatever you can to create an audience for the work.

Social Issues of the Time

Even though President Abraham Lincoln had passed the 13th Amendment in 1863 abolishing slavery, things were far from equal in the United States. Contrary to the Constitution all men who were "created equally" were not being treated equally. Negroes were discriminated against in all aspects of daily life, housing, education, employment etc. Jim Crow Laws condoned segregation in the South. Langston Hughes was no stranger to discrimination. He chose to celebrate his people and bring light to this mistreatment through his work. Novelist, William Burroughs understood the influence of art in social change. "Artists to my mind are the real architects of change, and not political legislators, who implement change after the fact."(5) Some time passed between the Harlem Renaissance and the Civil Rights legislation of the 1960's, but writers like Langston Hughes were planting the seeds of change. I have included two of Langston Hughes' poems that illustrate the social tensions and injustice of the time.

I, Too, Sing America

I am the darker brother,
They send me to eat in the kitchen
When company comes.
 But I laugh,
 And eat well,
 And grow strong.
They'll see how beautiful I am
 And be ashamed-
I, too, am American

Discussion Questions

Do you think the theme of this poem is positive or negative? Why or Why not?

Why is the darker brother sent to the kitchen to eat?

How does the character in the poem respond to his treatment? Why do you think Langston chose to respond this way? (Remember his Grandmother's advice).

Justice

Justice is a blind goddess
To this we blacks are wise.
Her bandages hide two festering sores
that once perhaps were eyes.

Discussion Questions

It would be helpful for student understanding if an image of Lady Justice was available. Students could see what the author means by bandages on her eyes. Also, the class could discuss the assertion that Justice is blind.

Why does the author use the image of festering sores? Are the eyes really festering sores?

What effect does the word "perhaps" have in the last line? Is it intended to cast doubt over the fact that Justice is blind? Had Negroes received fair treatment under the law?

Writing Activity

Have students write about what they understand social injustice to be in our time. Does it still occur? Is everyone treated fairly in 2001? What about relationships between police officers and citizens of color? What observations have they made about that?

Craft Instruction for Writer's Workshop Mini-Lessons

These are some craft techniques that can easily be covered in one or two mini-lessons. Students can incorporate them in their individual compositions. All of the poems listed in this unit can be found in **The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes, Arnold Rampersad, Editor, Vintage, New York, 1995.**

Repetition

This can include repeating a word, phrase or line throughout the piece, or at the start of each stanza. The repetition could come at the start and end of the piece, creating a "frame". Some poems that use repetition- **Troubled Woman, Waterfront Streets, New Moon and My Loves.**

Dialect

This is the use of regional words or pronunciations. It is done to enhance the tone and sound of a piece. Use of dialect can say a lot about the character that is speaking. It can give insight into where they come from and their level of education. Dialect can also be used to mock stereotypes. Some poems that use dialect- **Baby and Mother to Son.**

Simile

The author uses like or as to create a comparison. Use items that have similarities to increase the effect. "It was as quite as the cemetery at night." "It was as hot as my Grandma's kitchen on a Sunday in August."

Alliteration

The use of a repeating consonant sound at the beginning of words or within words. It can help establish tone and the sound of the work when read aloud.

Analogy

This is done to explain something unfamiliar by comparing it to something familiar. It can help comprehension by simplifying ideas and making them clearer to the reader.

Imagery

Imagery is the use of certain expressions or words in an attempt to invoke the senses (sight, smell, taste, feeling, and hearing) as one reads. A good poem to look at for imagery is **When Sue Wears Red.**

Student Compositions

One requirement of the unit is that each student will create their own poem. During Writer's Workshop they have had the opportunity to draft and pre-write and practice with craft techniques. Students may be experiencing writer's block or the feeling that they don't have anything worth writing about or anything important to say. I have included some selections from a book called **You Hear Me? Poems and Writings by Teenage Boys, Edited by Betsy Franco, Candlewick Press, Cambridge, Mass. 2000** to share with students..

Dark Cellar

I like to hide in my dark, damp cellar
Where rats scurry across the cold, cement floor.
I don't know why I like to hide in my dark, damp cellar.
All I know is that anger and sorrow
Evaporate into clouds of air
And bad thoughts disintegrate
When I'm there.
Every boy should have a cellar.

Joshua White, age 12

Does My Mother Look Like This?

Is she light-skinned
or is she brown?

Does she smile
or does she frown?

Is my mother tall
or is she short?

Is she a quitter
or a good sport?

Does my mother look like
a person who would

Leave four sons and a daughter
and go to another place?

What does she look like?
Can you picture her face?

Seth Chappell, age 14

I Never Told This To Anyone

There is a secret that I have told no one.
the burning house that stood blazing on the hill,
the house that was occupied by a kind old man,
burned to the ground in front of my eyes.

No words were ever spoken
and only I know the truth.
I never told even this much to anyone.

Maurice Beaman, age 16

Suggested Poems for Teacher to Read Orally

As mentioned earlier, all poems listed in this unit can be found in, **The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes, Arnold Rampersad, Editor.**

Thanksgiving Time

Waterfront Streets

The Weary Blues

Aunt Sue's Stories

Disillusion

The Negro Speaks of Rivers

April Rain Song

Mother to Son

Stars

The Dream Keeper

Dream Variation

As I Grew Older

The Blues

Long Trip

Steel Mills

When Sue Wears Red

The Negro

Merry-Go-Round

Carolina Cabin

List of Poems for Students' Oral Recitation

These poems were selected for the proper length and structure and vocabulary that will lead to powerful recitations. Students can perform for classmates or during an assembly. We had students recite as part of our own Cotton Club.

My People

April Rain Song

The Dream Keeper

Dream Dust

Dreams

WinterMoon

Color

New Year

Passing Love

To Make Words Sing

The Blues

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Evaluation of Student Recitation

A scoring guide or rubric can be provided to students so that they have clear expectations. A sample rubric is provided.

Score- 4- Student completely memorized passage, spoke in a clear voice, with inflection and maintained eye contact with audience.

Score- 3- Student memorized passage, delivery was not as clear, shifted eyes away from the audience.

Score- 2- Student did not memorize poem, they read from paper, used some inflection, made some eye contact with audience.

Score- 1- Student read from paper with no inflection or eye contact with audience.

Score- 0- Student did not participate.

Standards Addressed in this Unit

These standards were taken from the Pittsburgh Public Schools 62 Content Standards.

C1 All students use effective research and information management skills, including locating primary and secondary sources of information with traditional and emerging library technologies.

C3 All students respond orally and in writing to information and ideas gained by reading narrative and informational texts and use the information and ideas to make decisions and solve problems.

C4 All students write for a variety of purposes, including to narrate, inform and persuade.

C6 All students exchange information orally, including understanding and giving spoken instructions, asking and answering questions appropriately and promoting effective group communication.

C8 All students compose and make oral presentations.

AH1 All students describe meanings they find in various works from literature on the basis of aesthetic understanding of the art form.

AH3 All students relate work to the historical and cultural context in which it was created.

CI9 All students demonstrate an understanding of the history and nature of prejudice and relate their knowledge to current issues facing society.

Endnotes

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1. Keene, Ellin and Susan Zimmerman. Mosaic of Thought. New Hampshire: Heinemann, 1997. Donald Graves, foreward.
2. Bowman, Catherine. "Old Man Blues Got You." Poetry Literary Cavalcade, 2000: 19.
3. Zinsser, William. On Writing Well. New York: Harper Perennial, 1998. Toni Morrison, page 245.
4. "Free Verse." Collier's Encyclopedia. 1997: 654.
5. Charles, Ann, ed. The Portable Beat Reader. New York: Penguin, 1992. William Burroughs, page 31.

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