

Curriculum Unit:

Creative Expression
and Core Literacy
Concepts

By

Robert Love

Introduction

This curriculum unit will be used to enrich the literacy and expression skills of 6th-9th grade students by using poetry and other forms of creative writing. Specifically, it is designed to increase vocabulary, sharpen writing skills and thought construction as well building stronger reading and reading comprehension abilities. The unit is structured to accomplish these goals for a group of approximately 15 to 20 over a 4 to 6 week time span with 2 to 3 visits per week. Many aspects of the unit design support both group and one-on-one settings and can be paced according to the varying literacy comprehension and reading levels that may be encountered in the classroom. The learning activities created for this curriculum unit are able to be modified for more creative expression and interaction based on the needs of the group. The aim is to reach schools in urban areas with student populations that are 80% to 90% African American and/or Latino. It is these schools and student populations that experience the highest rates of impoverished communities, drop outs and low reading scores. Therefore, I find these settings are perfect for the implementation of curriculum that encourages expression through creative writing styles to cope with and understand experiences and the redefining of core literacy concepts through the process of self-discovery.

Rationale

In my experiences as a student and an educator I have witnessed the lack of interest that results from the unfortunate occurrence of not being able to identify with learning materials that are being presented. This is a major problem in urban communities and schools because there is a pronounced struggle to find the meaning in studying a subject that does not relate to the personal aspects of one's self. Another prominent issue with public schooling that effects urban youth most directly is the disregarding of special intelligences that are developed outside of the school standards and commonly validated methods of learning. This particular challenge creates struggles with communication abilities and expressing feelings constructively in an educative setting. There is a sheer brilliance that is born out of simple human modes of being like survival and adaptive thinking that are not wholly recognized in school and quite often are seen as disruptive or oppositional to deep involvement in the educative process. I have discovered that when these self-defined intelligences and environmental knowledge are incorporated and embraced in a structured school setting there can be a blending of the two that results in an immersion in the broader ideas of expanded understanding that erases any underlying mistrust or lack of confidence. This unit of curriculum was created to emphasize those connections an interested and engaged student makes with a topic of study on a creative level which fosters a deeper understanding of essential learning concepts that can be reflected in standards as well as innovation assessment approaches.

The design of this curriculum unit is structured intentionally to help students relate to core literacy concepts as they explore personally and experientially relevant subjects. It encourages participation in activities that are student driven and focus on student defined priorities and that work to help teachers clearly identify things that have impeded understanding for students in previous points during their learning process. The strategies in this unit use elements such as variety, strong student-teacher dialogue and freedom of choice to inspire deeper and more purposeful interaction with academic standards. Through this unit students will find themselves improving along the lines of academic standards like reading level and reading comprehension, spelling, punctuation, pre-writing and articulation. Ultimately, they will create more personal relationships with what they are learning about and teachers will discover new approaches to take with students that have been the most difficult to reach.

Enduring Understandings and Essential Questions

The enduring understandings and essential questions of this unit are developed to help create a perspective that students can begin to view the educative and schooling process through. The goal is to encourage a perspective that is rooted in personal experiences and a self determining of what interests a student has and how to pursue them. In addition, this more interest based way of looking at things will influence depth and consistency of learning outside of a school environment.

Students will come to understand that:

- We are all responsible for telling the story of our experiences
- Becoming a better reader and writer is important to how and what I learn about myself
- Creative expression can make school a fun experience
- We have to be able to process what we read in order to apply the knowledge to our lives
- We can articulate intelligence with the use of increased vocabulary
- Discussing ideas is a good way to create solutions
- Communication is important no matter where you are
- Being able to relate to something is a good way to understand it
- Characters in literature are inspired in some way by real world experiences
- Creativity and academics can coexist
- Poetry is a way to strengthen literacy skills
- Literacy skills can be used to create social change

The key questions that students will be inspired to answer are:

- What is creativity?
- What is expression?
- What is poetry?
- What is literacy?
- What is poverty?
- Why are words powerful?
- What is intelligence?
- Why do people decide to write stories?
- Why are my personal experiences important?
- In what ways can creative expression increase understanding of core literacy concepts?
- How can strong literacy skills help to describe personal experiences?
- How does an author develop the elements of a story?
- What makes a character in a story seem realistic?
- How does communication help solve problems?
- Can you be creative in school?
- How does being create help learning?
- How can poetry help me learn about myself?
- How does reading build good vocabulary skills?

Conceptual Lens

The main conceptual lens for this curriculum unit will be:

Creative Expression/Personal Experience.

These secondary lenses will be used in connection with the main conceptual lens:

- History
- Social Change

Assessments

The primary ways that student success and understanding will be assessed are:

- Group discussions
- Group projects
- Reading of journal entries
- Expansion of vocabulary
- Clear thought expression
- Creativity

Learning Activities

The core activities created for this unit will be the clearest way to monitor a student's engagement, creative expression and overall grasp of core literacy concepts. Each one holds the opportunity for students to gain a deeper understanding of the material being studied and a much more definite belief in self.

1. Daily Experience Journal (Week 1 – Week 6)

Each student will be given a journal and must write in it at least once every day. Students will be given writing prompts based around getting them to express feelings and emotions regarding certain experiences in their lives. These prompts will simultaneously be working to strengthen grammar, vocabulary and expression of thought. Journals will be checked once a weekly to gauge participation.

2. Definitions (Week 2 –Week 6)

Students will be given a list of words that they must look up and define as they participate in the unit. After finding and writing the definition of each word students will have to write about an experience or personal account that applies. This project has to be turned in before the last day of the unit.

3. Short Story reading and group discussion (Weeks 3 and 4)

Students will be given a choice of several contrasting ideas to read about (victory/defeat., love/hate, etc.). After choosing one they will have a choice of short stories to read that embodies the idea that they chose. After reading the group will come together with each student explaining the idea they selected and why as well as a brief summary of the story and how the idea was reflected. This can also be done with the class reading the same short story and exploring the same idea.

4. Main Characters (Weeks 3 and 4)

The teacher will facilitate a discussion about what a main character is, how one is developed and the importance of one to the overall story. The group will explore several main characters from appropriate African American literary works as way to clarify the definition. Students will choose one of the characters to profile and begin reading the book that the character is featured in. After reading the work, students will be asked to create a piece using a form of creative writing (Poetry, prose, vignette, letter, script) that details a “conversation” they would like to have with this character. In this piece students can talk about what they related to, question they would ask and other thing that they thought about.

5. Creativity and Influence (Week 5)

The group will explore the connections between African American social movements throughout history and any creative idea that helped to propel them. Looking at several example of influential figures during the time of each movement (Frederick Douglass and Abolition, Martin Luther King Jr. and Civil Rights) the group will discuss how creativity was used through writing, speaking, etc. This activity will mainly be for group discussions and journal entries.

6. Published Author Project (Weeks 5 and 6)

This activity will be the most important of the entire unit as it incorporates everything, creative and literacy based, which will be learned in the unit. Students will have the choice of writing a short story, script or vignette featuring an element we discussed during the unit or writing a series of autobiographical poems or a series of letters with an autobiographical theme. Students will be able to showcase what they have learned about core literacy concepts and what they have discovered about themselves. Their finished product will be printed up in the form of a book and, if they choose to, multiple copies can be printed for to share with friend, family and the school.

Unit Materials

This unit does require the use of many materials but the one that are needed are very important.

- Journals
- Pens/Pencils
- Books/Short Stories
- Copies of quotes and biographical information of historical figures.
- Computers
- Folders/Binders