Dear Educators and Counselors,

Can youth-written stories bridge divides and create lasting social change? They most certainly can. Our stories tell of young people facing discrimination head on, finding positive ways to celebrate their identities, learning ways to communicate across differences, and advocating for themselves and others.

In this lesson guide to this issue, called “I Define Me,” we highlight three stories where your students can explore the theme of identity:

- First, after reading Christina Oxley’s story “Defining Blackness for Myself,” students discuss the ways in which Christina’s experiences as a young black woman aren’t valued in her school and how she surrounds herself with people and culture that celebrates her identity.
- Then, in “Leaving El Salvador – Forever,” the writer tells the story of his journey from El Salvador to New York City to be reunited with his parents. In the lesson, students explore the decision-making skills and strengths that led the writer across borders and through danger. The writer’s narrative gives crucial insight into headline stories that often dehumanize the immigrant experience.
- In the lesson accompanying Mariam S.’s “Speaking Up About Sexism In My Family,” students practice positively advocating for themselves when faced with discrimination.

These three lessons will also appear in a curriculum we are currently developing at Youth Communication called All In: Advocating for Yourself and Others in a Diverse World. This curriculum will include about 25 lessons ready to be used in your school’s advisory or in after-school programs, and will be available in September.

Sincerely,

Janelle Greco & Tim Fredrick
Co-Directors of Education
jgreco@youthcomm.org
tfredrick@youthcomm.org

REMINDER TO SUBSCRIBERS
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NEW CURRICULUM PROGRAM

All In
Advocating for Yourself and Others In a Diverse World

Includes 25 sessions on topics including:
  - Celebrating Our Culture
  - Exploring Identity
  - Communicating Across Differences

Anthologies of True Stories by Teens | Curriculum Guide | Professional Development

TO LEARN MORE, CONTACT
Betsy Cohen: bcohen@youthcomm.org
ELA & Social and Emotional Learning

Find Value in Your Identity

Story to Use: “Defining Blackness for Myself” by Christina Oxley, p.3

Summary of Story: In her predominantly white school, Christina faces hate language, discrimination, and a curriculum that gives only lip service to the experience of Black Americans. With the help of a support network and affirming experiences like going to a music and arts festival called Afropunk, Christina realizes that she—not society’s expectations—gets to decide who she is, what she likes, and how she acts.

Lesson Objectives and Standards Connections:
Students will be able to:
- Annotate a text during the reading process in order to develop an understanding of the text’s main idea and supporting details (CCS R.1 and R.2)
- Discuss their interpretation and analysis of, as well as personal connections to, a narrative nonfiction text and to a poem (CCS SL.1)
- Write in response to a text and to other students’ written responses (CCS W.4 and W.10)

Before Reading the Story (5-10 minutes)

This opening activity will activate background knowledge to boost reading comprehension and set the emotional tone for the story.

1. Before the group starts, post two signs on opposite ends of your space. One should read “agree” and the other “disagree.”

2. After welcoming the group, tell them that they will be doing an activity that allows them to move around while learning more about what they and their peers think about a topic.

3. While the group is still seated, review the directions for the Opinion Continuum. Tell them:
   - “On either end of the room, there are signs that read ‘agree’ and ‘disagree.’”
   - “I will read a statement and you will decide whether it’s true for you (agree) or not (disagree). Then you will move somewhere in between the two signs that reflects your opinion. If you’re unsure, you should stand somewhere in the middle.”
   - “Once everyone has moved, I will invite volunteers to share why they chose to stand where they are.”

4. Clear a space and ask group members to stand somewhere between the two signs.

5. Read the first statement and ask group members to move to a spot between the two signs that reflects their opinion:
   - “My school does a good job of teaching me about different races.”
6. Once all group members have moved in response to the statement, ask them to notice where other group members are standing. (You can support minority positions by moving closer to someone who is alone at one end of the continuum.)

7. Ask at least one group member standing on either end of the continuum to share why they are standing where they are. Tell group members they may change their position if they are influenced by another group member’s opinion.

8. After each question, have everyone return to the middle.

9. Repeat for each statement:
   - “The lessons we are taught at my school value the experiences of those who face discrimination in our society.”
   - “I feel supported at my school.”
   - “There’s someone at my school I can talk to about discrimination or stereotyping.”

10. Have everyone return to their seats and thank group members for sharing their opinions.

**During Reading** (20 minutes)

*Students will read a story by one of our youth writers and discuss their connections and responses.*

1. Introduce the story (see the story summary above)

2. Share the expectations for a group read-aloud: volunteers take turns reading aloud as much or as little as they would like. As the group leader, you may stop periodically to ask students to share their responses to the story.

3. While sitting in a circle, read the story aloud together. Consider asking these open-ended questions during or after the read aloud:
   - What’s standing out to you about the story?
   - What connections can you make with Christina’s experience?
   - What advice would you give the writer if you were her friend?

4. Thank the group for reading and sharing.

**After Reading the Story** (20 minutes)

*During this post-reading activity, students will discuss the themes of the story in small groups.*

1. Introduce the **Questioning Carousel** activity by telling the group that they will have an opportunity to discuss the themes of the story with small groups of peers.

2. While the group is still seated, review the directions. Tell them:
   - “I have posted four posters around the room, each with a question on it.”
   - “Spend three minutes at each poster in small groups, discussing and writing down your responses to each question.”
• “When I call time, rotate one poster clockwise with your group. At your new poster, read what has been written.”
• “Add ideas and comment on what’s already there with new thoughts or questions. Feel free to get creative.”
• “Wait for instructions when you have completed a full lap and have returned to your first poster.”

3. Read the signs in each corner aloud, checking for understanding about each choice:
   • Question 1: How is Christina’s identity not valued in her school?
   • Question 2: How does it make Christina feel that her identity is not valued in her school?
   • Question 3: What could Christina’s school change to show that it values her identity?
   • Question 4: What does Christina do to value her own identity?

4. Divide the group into four groups by having them count off 1 to 4, directing each numbered group to start at the appropriately numbered poster.

5. Pass out one or two markers per group, then tell them to begin answering the question at their poster while you keep track of time.

6. While the small groups write and discuss, move around the room to listen and support them.

7. In three minutes, or when the hum of conversation dies down, regain everyone’s attention and tell all groups to rotate one spot clockwise.

8. Repeat steps 6 and 7 until groups have traveled to all four posters.

9. When groups are at their first poster again, regain their attention. Tell them:
   • “Read over the comments written at this poster. Circle or underline two or three of the best responses from your peers.”

10. After groups have chosen their favorite responses, ask one group member from each poster to share what they chose and why.

11. Time permitting, have group members share a few highlights from their discussions with the whole group. They can share points of agreement or disagreement, new ideas, or questions.

12. Have group members return to their seats and thank them for sharing.
ELA and Social & Emotional Learning

A Journey of Strength


Story Summary: U.S. embarks on a long, perilous journey from El Salvador to the United States in order to be reunited with his parents in New York. He crosses rough terrain, travels in crowded, airless trucks, is detained by Border Patrol, lives in a shelter, and falls in love, eventually reuniting with his family in New York City.

Lesson Objectives and Standards Connections:
Students will be able to:

- Annotate a text during the reading process in order to develop an understanding of the text's main idea and supporting details (CCS R.1 and R.2)
- Discuss their interpretation and analysis of, as well as personal connections to, a narrative nonfiction text (CCS SL.1)
- Write in response to a narrative nonfiction text (CCS W.4 and W.10)

Before Reading the Story (10 minutes)
This opening activity will activate background knowledge to boost reading comprehension and set the emotional tone for the story.

1. Welcome students to the group. Introduce the lesson by telling them they will be reading a true story by a teen who embarks on a difficult journey from El Salvador to the United States.

2. Introduce the Freewrite or Quick Draw activity by reminding students that it is an opportunity to freely express their thoughts on paper without worrying about spelling, grammar, or anything else. Students will have about four minutes to write or draw in response to the prompt. The goal is to express their thoughts freely without worrying about writing conventions. The expectation is that everyone writes or draws, without stopping, for the full time.

3. Freewrite prompt: “Write or draw your responses to the following prompt: Write about a time you had to say goodbye to someone. How did you feel? Was it difficult? If so, why?”

4. After students have completed the freewrite or quick draw, transition to a Pair Share. Students should select a partner or turn to the person next to them.

5. Facing each other and practicing active listening, partners each take a turn sharing parts of their responses that they feel comfortable sharing. The listener should not respond, but should actively listen to the speaker. You can use a timer or wait until the hum of conversation dies down before closing the activity.
6. Thank students for sharing.

During Reading (20 minutes)
*By practicing active reading strategies while reading aloud and discussing as a group, students build comprehension and support fluency.*

1. Introduce the story (see the story summary above).

2. Share the expectations for a group read-aloud: volunteers take turns reading aloud as much or as little as they would like. As the group leader, you may stop periodically to discuss or check in on active reading by asking students to share their responses to the story.

3. Tell students they will practice an active reading strategy called reading for a purpose. This will help them read for a purpose and be prepared to use the text in later activities.

4. **Reading for a purpose** directions: Ask students to identify times when the writer demonstrates a strength. When this occurs, students should write an “S” in the margin. They should write a “D” in the margin when they see the writer make an important decision.

5. While sitting in a circle, read the story aloud together. Stop to discuss periodically, supporting peer-to-peer talk and non-judgmental listening. To do this, ask for volunteers to share the strengths and decisions they saw the writer demonstrate. Alternately, you can pose an open question such as “What stands out to you in this section and why?”

6. When you finish the story, ask the group to discuss their reactions to the story, including the questions it raised for them. They can turn and talk to a neighbor before you discuss as a whole group.

After Reading the Story (20 minutes)
*During this post-reading activity students will make connections, build understanding, and rehearse positive behaviors.*

1. Introduce this activity by saying to the group:
   - “Now that we’ve read the story, we’re going to write a letter to the writer.”
   - “Your goal is to communicate your ideas and responses to the story, so don’t worry about spelling and grammar.”
   - “There are no right or wrong answers, just your ideas and how the story spoke to you.”

2. Read the **Dear Teen Writer** guidelines aloud from the chart paper you’ve prepared:
   - What were some of his decisions that resonated or stuck out to you? Would you have made similar decisions?
   - What are some of his strengths that you share?
   - What are some of his strengths that you admire?
   - Closing: “Sincerely, (Your Name)”

3. Pass out journals or notebook paper and pencils.
4. Give group members about 8 minutes to write their letters. Move around the room offering encouragement and support.

5. When about 8 minutes are up, tell group members to finish their last thought and put their pencils down.

6. Explain to the group that they are now going to do a Pair Share. Tell them to turn to the person next to them and take turns sharing the parts of their letters that they feel comfortable sharing.

7. Each member of the pair should take about a minute to share. Cue partners to switch roles after the first minute. Use a timer or wait until the hum of conversation dies down before closing the activity.

8. Time permitting, lead a discussion by asking group members to comment on what they heard, such as similarities, differences, or personal connections to their peers’ responses. They can also discuss points they agree or disagree with, new ideas they’ve been given, and questions they still have.

9. Thank group members for sharing.
ELA & Social and Emotional Learning

Unfair Expectations

Story to Use: “Speaking Up About Sexism in My Family” by Mariam S., p. 22

Story Summary: Mariam’s family believes that women should be responsible for household chores, so as Eid, a Muslim holiday, approaches, Mariam is stuck with cleaning duties while her brothers get to relax in their room. Mariam decides to speak up about these unfair expectations to her mother. Things escalate before they come to an understanding.

Lesson Objectives and Connections:
- Annotate a text during the reading process in order to develop an understanding of the text’s main idea and supporting details (CCS R.1 and R.2)
- Discuss their interpretation and analysis of, as well as personal connections to, a narrative nonfiction text (CCS SL.1)

Before Reading the Story (15 min)
This opening activity will activate background knowledge to boost reading comprehension and set the emotional tone for the story.

1. Welcome students to the group. Introduce the lesson by telling them they will be reading a true story by a teen who is angered by her family’s sexist traditions when it comes to chores.

2. Introduce the next activity by telling students they will be having a small group discussion and then doing a drawing activity afterwards.

3. Divide students into groups of 3 or 4.

4. Ask students to do the following: “Discuss a situation in which someone unfairly expected something of you or made an assumption about you because of an aspect of your identity (e.g. race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, disability, etc…).”

5. After students have discussed for 5 minutes, have them choose one of the scenarios from their group and draw it out on flip chart paper.
   - Remind students that the goal is to express their thoughts freely without worrying about writing or drawing conventions.
   - Students should include a thought bubble in the drawing of what the person was thinking during the scenario.

6. After students have completed the drawing activity, have each group share their drawing and scenario.

7. Thank students for sharing.
During Reading (20 min.)

*By practicing active reading strategies while reading aloud and discussing as a group, students build comprehension and support fluency.*

1. Introduce the story (see the story summary above).

2. Share the expectations for a group read-aloud: volunteers take turns reading aloud as much or as little as they would like. As the group leader, you may stop periodically to discuss or check in on active reading by asking students to share their responses to the story.

3. Tell students they will practice an active reading strategy called reading for a purpose. This will help them read for a purpose and be prepared to use the text in later activities.

4. **Reading for a purpose** directions: Ask students to identify parts of the story that stand out for them, or when they have a reaction to something that happens. When this occurs, students should write a star in the margin.

5. While sitting in a circle, read the story aloud together. Stop to discuss periodically, supporting peer-to-peer talk and non-judgmental listening. To do this, ask for volunteers to share what they wrote a star next to and why. Alternately, you can pose an open question such as “What stands out to you in this section and why?”

6. When you finish the story, ask the group to discuss their reactions to the story, including the questions it raised for them. They can turn and talk to a neighbor before you discuss as a whole group.

After Reading the Story (15 min)

*During this post-reading activity students will make connections, build understanding, and rehearse positive behaviors.*

1. Introduce the **Role Play** activity by saying to the group:
   - “Now that we’ve read the story, we’re going to do a role playing activity connected to the situation that Mariam writes about.”
   - “First, we’ll brainstorm some of the options that were available to Mariam, and then you will act out one of them in small groups.”

2. Read this prompt aloud, or write it on a piece of chart paper (or on the white board):
   - Mariam was upset that she had to clean while the male members of their family could do whatever they wanted. When she discovered the moldy muffins, how could she have initiated a conversation with her mother about her concerns that didn’t lead to screaming and crying?

3. Ask for students to brainstorm ideas as a group. Record what’s shared on the chart paper or on a white board.

4. After you have a list of 4-5 ideas, break students up into groups of 3. (Join a group if there’s an even number of students.)

5. Explain that each person will have a specific role and motivation:
   - Mariam wants to be treated the same as the male members of her family.
- Mariam’s mother is worried that if she lets her daughters do what they want, everyone will think poorly of them and her.

6. Give groups 5 minutes to select one of the ideas brainstormed by the whole group (or one that they’ve thought of on their own) and plan how they’d role play it in front of the group.

7. Ask small groups to perform their role play for the whole group. Remind the audience to support actors by listening. If the actors get stuck, ask audience members for suggestions the actors can try.

8. After all groups have performed, debrief by asking the whole group the following questions:
   - When faced with situations where we feel we are being discriminated against, what are the best ways to advocate for ourselves?
   - Do you agree with where Mariam is at the end of the story—to focus on celebrating the freedoms she does have?

9. Thank group members for performing, supporting, and sharing.