



CONTEMPORARY LATINA WRITERS

Level: high school
Class: English, Spanish

Rationale

“Latino” refers to a wide range of groups of people living in or from countries in the Americas that were colonized by the Spanish, Portuguese, or French (in the case of Haiti). While Latin American countries are similar in some respects, each country has a different history, economy, political system, and culture. While Chicanos, Dominicans, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, and Brazilians are all Latinos, there are similarities and differences among them and it is important for youngsters to understand the individual nature of each group. The approach suggested here is through literature, and is confined to studying women writers, because young men and women need to read the excellent work by outstanding women that they might otherwise ignore unless it were part of the curriculum. Further, the Philadelphia’s Women’s History Project has found that young men treat women with more respect when they study their lives and ideas. An addition to the curriculum could easily be designed to investigate Latino writers, with many of the same recommended resources used for research.

Another important reason for teaching about ethnic groups is to have students investigate their own culture. Rudolfo Anaya, a Chicano writer who teaches at the University of New Mexico, has stated his views about the importance of teaching the literature of specific groups:

by
Dr. Evelyn Bender
efhschlib@hslc.org
Edison/Fareira High School
151 W. Luzerne Street
Philadelphia, PA 19140
215-324-9440

"You can lead students to books, but if the content doesn't engage them, they lose interest and soon become dropouts. My experience, and the experience of many teachers I know, have taught me that part of the cause for our alarming dropout statistics is this narrow, circumscribed curriculum in language and literature. To reverse these deplorable dropout statistics and to help create a positive self-image in our students, I firmly believe we need to present the literatures that reflect our true diversity."

"The literature of the barrio, of the neighborhood, of the region, of the ethnic group, can be a useful tool of engagement, a way to put students in touch with their social reality. What is pertinent to our personal background is pertinent to our process of learning. And so, if students are going to be truly free to learn, they must be exposed to stories that portray their history and image in a positive manner. They must be given the opportunity to read the literatures of the many different cultures of our own country."

"...We are told that because we are Mexican, Native, black, or Asian-American—or women—somebody else has the right literature and language to describe our reality. Each of our communities has much to teach this country. Each barrio, each neighborhood, each region, men and women, all have a vested interest in education, and it's time we made that interest known.... We know one approach is not best for all; we know we have to incorporate the many voices of literature into the curriculum." (Anaya, pp. 408-409)

Lesson Overview

Latina Writers is an investigation into specific writers, and is research-based. The content of the unit can cover several writers or many writers, and can go into as much depth as the students can handle, and can be the springboard for many activities. Recommended writers are Julia Alvarez (Dominican-American), Nicholasa Mohr (Puerto Rican), Sandra Cisneros (Chicana), Ana Castillo (Chicana), and Isabel Allende (Chilean). Other writers can be included or substituted. The sample lesson will be on Julia Alvarez.

The teacher will give some background material about Julia Alvarez, read a passage from How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents and explain the project. The librarian will demonstrate the electronic information technology (CD-ROM, on-line [the encyclopedias available in Prodigy or America On Line; Internet or the World Wide Web access]) and print resources available. The class will be divided into groups and assigned topics to cover: biographical information about Julia Alvarez, critical information about her work (How the Garcia Girls Lost their Accents, Time of the Butterflies, poetry), the basic facts, history, culture, music, dance, politics and economics of the Dominican Republic, and Dominican immigration to the United States. The class will meet in the library to gather information with the help of the teacher and librarian. During the course of the project, the teacher will explain the research process. Groups will work on their topics, write (combined) papers, and make a presentation to the class. If preferred, instead of the groups researching separate topics about each writer, the groups can be assigned individual writers. The classes will also be reading, discussing, and comparing the works of the writers, and comparing and contrasting the cultures.

Objectives

- * Students will learn about several Latina writers and understand their work.
- * Students will learn about the culture, history, and background of several Latino groups.
- * Students will learn how to conduct a research project.
- * Students will learn how to relate literature to important social issues and their own lives.
- * Students will learn how to create a project in cooperation with others.

Time Needed

A week minimum, but can be extensive, depending on the teacher and the students' involvement.

Materials

copies of books, research material, the library, computers for writing.

Procedures

Studying Latina writers is an important experience for contemporary American youth. This "lesson plan" is a suggestion for a way of incorporating the study into the curriculum. However, the activities should be modified to fit the teaching style of the instructor and the learning styles of the students.

Julia Alvarez is a contemporary Dominican American writer, whose first book How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents, speaks to young people in many ways because it concerns the relationships between parents and children, immigration to another culture, and the difficulties in coming of age. A chapter can be used, or the entire book.

Julia Alvarez spent her childhood in the Dominican Republic. Her family had lived in the United States for a while, and several members attended school or worked there. The family finally moved to the United States when life became too dangerous under the Trujillo regime. While Alvarez looked forward to becoming American, adjusting to the society was more difficult than she had expected. Garcia Girls reflects her family's experiences in both countries.

Away from her homeland, Alvarez became quiet and thoughtful. She was a good student, a lover of books, and attended college, studying literature and writing. She now teaches at Middlebury College in Vermont, while continuing to research and write her books of fiction and poetry. Her second fiction book was Time of the Butterflies, about a family of women revolutionaries during Trujillo's time.

The approach of this project is to learn about Julia Alvarez by the students' conducting research into her life, criticism of her work, and reading and discussing her work. It is a cooperative venture, with the librarian and teacher collaborating. One starting point is for the teacher to talk briefly about Julia Alvarez and read a portion of her work to whet the students' appetite for more. A chapter of her book can be assigned for

homework or read aloud by the teacher or the class. The class needs to be scheduled for library time to conduct the research. Groups can be formed and assigned individual topics to investigate, or individual authors, depending on the time commitment and the depth of research desired.

In the library, the librarian will demonstrate information sources, depending on the available technology and reference books. Some possibilities: an on-line encyclopedia on Prodigy or American On-line, CD-ROM index to journal articles (Infotrac, for example), CD-ROM encyclopedias, CD-ROM discs on women or authors, etc. Internet's World Wide Web is very good for information about countries, but seems have little information at this time about Latina authors. The bibliography at the end of the unit lists many excellent information sources.

While the librarian helps the students find information, the teacher will instruct the students on the research process. The end product can be a variety of forms, from a research paper to a multimedia program. Group work, in which students have defined roles is a recommend way of working together. Papers should be typed on computer; learning to use computers can be part of the activities of this lesson.

Follow-up activities

There are many possibilities for activities related to this project:

- * Class presentations, research papers
- * Video: role-playing the authors and interviewing them, panel discussion, dramatizing an incident from one of Alvarez's books, interviewing members of the cultural groups from the community or from families of the students
- * related subjects can be researched, such as immigration from Latin America, culture, music, dance, art, relationships between the countries and the United States, comparison of politics and economics among the author's home countries, colonialism, government censorship and repression, "the disappeared"
- * write to Julia Alvarez
- * gender issues: machismo, women in Latin America, roles of men and women, sexual preference issues (gays, lesbians). (Possible discussion questions: what roles do men and women have in your family, community, or in a specific country? [who cooks, cleans, works outside the family, for example]. What rights do women have in various countries? What are the employment rates for men and women? What about workers' pay? How are gays and lesbians considered in various countries, for example, Cuba compared to Brazil? Are there slang terms for gays and lesbians—how many are there, and are they slurs? Is there a literature by and about homosexuals in various countries?
- * invite local speakers, for example experts in Latin American studies, various artists, writers, filmmakers
- * write a story based on the student's experiences

- * connect to a classroom and communicate through Internet
- * publish on Internet through a school or class home page
- * communicate with a key pal about individual cultures

Bibliography

(Note—none of the reference books about writers covers *every* Latina writer)

Anaya, Rudolfo, The Anaya Reader. New York: Warner, 1995.

An excellent selection of Anaya's works and his ideas about education.

Caribbean Connections, Overview of Regional History. Washington, D.C.: NECA, nd. (1-202-429-0137)

Good background information on Caribbean countries and Puerto Rico

"Dominican Republic," Worldmark Encyclopedia of the Nations, Americas. New York, John Wiley and Sons, Inc., New York, 1988.

Basic information—a good starting point.

Falk, Lisa, Cultural Reporter. (Smithsonian Institution), 1995. Tom Snyder Productions, Watertown, MA. (1-800-342-0236)

Use for oral history projects (interviewing community or family members about cultural practices).

Handbook of Latin American Literature, David William Foster. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1992.

Excellent articles on the history of literature in individual Latin American and Caribbean countries. One chapter covers Latino writing in the U.S.

Hispanic Literature Criticism. Detroit: Gale Research, Inc., 1994.

Basic information about Hispanic writers with a section on critical commentary and occasionally, an interview with a writer. Photos of the writers included.

Hispanic Writers: A Selection of Sketches from Contemporary Writers. Detroit: Gale Research, Inc., 1991.

Articles from Contemporary Authors have been gathered for this book. Informative but short "sketches" of the writers and their work.

Latin American Writers, Carlos A. Sole, ed. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1989.

Covers Latin American literature from Bernal Diaz del Castillo to the present. Excellent articles and bibliographies, plus a very good introduction to Latin American literature (including Brazilian).

Magill, Frank, ed., Masterpieces of Latino Literature. New York, Harper Collins, 1994.

Information about selected writers and detailed descriptions of one or more novels by an individual writer. Good for students, very much in the Magill style of Masterplots.

Modern Latin-American Fiction Writers, William Luis, ed. (Dictionary of Literary Biography, v. 145) Detroit: Gale Research, Inc., 1992.

Excellent articles convey the life and works of writers. Many details are included. First rate bibliographies.

Notable Hispanic American Women, Diane Telgen and Jim Kamp, editors. Detroit: Gale Research Inc., 1993.

Covers outstanding women in many fields.

Novas, Himilce, Everything You Need to Know about Latino History. New York: Penguin, 1991.

A good introduction to Latin American History for students. Although the title is informal, very important information is succinctly conveyed.

Randall, Margaret, Our Voices/Our Lives: Stories of Women from Central America and the Caribbean. Monroe, Maine: Common Courage Press, 1995.

For research into issues relating to women's lives and their roles in society.

Spanish American Authors of the Twentieth Century. New York: H.W. Wilson, 1992.

Information about Hispanic writers and their works, with extensive bibliographies.

Spanish American Women Writers: A Bio-Bibliographic Source Book. New York: Greenwood Press, 1990.

An excellent source of information about Latina writer and their works. Good bibliography. Use this for additional names of writers.

Why do People Move? Migration from Latin America, A Curriculum Unit for History and Social Studies, grades 6-10. Stanford, CA., Institute for International Studies: Latin America Project/SPICE.

Good for research on emigration and migration from Latin America and related issues.

The Women's Movement in Latin America: Feminism and the Transition to Democracy, Jane S. Jacquette, ed. Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989.

For information about issues about women's rights in Latin America.

Media

El Norte (film) (use if immigration is covered).

A brother and sister emigrate from Guatamala to Los Angeles in this very affecting film.

The Official Story (film) (use if government repression is researched)

An upper class women discovers that her adopted child was taken from two of the "disappeared" in Argentina.

Two Worlds of Angelita (film) (use if Puerto Rican migration is covered)

A young girl and her family move from Puerto Rico to New York. In Spanish with English subtitles. Available for borrowing from: Curriculum Resource Center, Center for Latin American Studies, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA 70118.

On-line (Internet) Resources

Caribbean Connection—Travel and tourism information.
www <http://206.185.20.245/info/>

Chicano/LatinoNet—a variety of information.
gopher latino.sscnet.ucla.edu
www <http://latino.sscnet.ucla.edu/>

The Latin American Database—Current information about the political and economic issues.
www <http://ladb.unm.edu>

Latin American Network Information Center—Good place to start exploring.
gopher lanic.utexas.edu
www <http://www.lanic.utexas.edu>

Latin American/Spanish Speaking Countries Home Page
www <Http://edb518ea.edb.utexas.edu/html/LatinAmerica.html>

The World Factbook—Basic facts on the Dominican Republic and other countries.
www <http://www.research.att.com/cgi-wald/dbaccess/411>