**Where I’m From: Inviting Student Lives into the Residential Community**

Developed for UA ResEd Staff Training from *Beyond Heroes & Holidays*

Lesson plan by Linda Christiansen

**Activity Goal:** We believe that an appreciation for diversity and multiculturalism is vital to the development of Caring & Inclusive Learning Communities. In an attempt to bring this to the forefront in an intentional way, this activity is designed to remind students that each them comes with a rich and diverse history that is both significant and has a powerful impact on who they are and what they bring to the community.

**Background:** In *Rethinking Our Classrooms*, the editors encourage teachers to make students feel “significant” in their classrooms:

> The ways we organize classroom life should seek to make children feel significant and cared about – by the teacher and by each other. Unless students feel emotionally and physically safe, they won't share real thoughts and feelings. Discussions will be tinny and dishonest. We need to design activities where students learn to trust and care for each other. Classroom life should, to the greatest extent possible, prefigure the kind of democratic and just society we envision and thus contribute to building that society. Together students and teachers can create a “community of conscience,” as educators Asa Hilliard and George Pine call it. (p. 4)

It is easy to extrapolate that this approach to a classroom environment can easily be transferred to a residential learning community. The author of this lesson plan, Linda Christensen, achieves this through activities such as "Where I’m From:"

Today in my classroom at Jefferson High School, I attempt to find ways to make students feels significant and cared about as well, to find space for their lives to become part of the curriculum. I do this by inviting them to write about their lives, about the worlds from which they come. Our sharing is one of the many ways we begin to build community together. It “Prefigures” a world where students can hear the home language from Diovana’s Pacific Islander heritage, Lurdes’ Mexican family, Oretha’s African American home, and my Norwegian roots and celebrate without mockery the similarities as well as the differences.

Sometimes grounding lessons in students’ lives can take a more critical role by asking them to examine how they have been shaped or manipulated by the media, for example. But as critical teachers, we shouldn’t overlook the necessity of connecting students around moments of joy as well.

**Procedure:**

1. Hand out the worksheet that includes “Where I’m From” by George Ella Lyon and ask a volunteer to read it aloud. Ask the participants to notice the details Lyon remembers about her past.

2. After the reading, ask the participants to write lists that match the ones in Lyon’s poem using the right side of the worksheet. Ask for volunteers to share some of them out loud. This verbal sharing sparks memories to bubble up from student to student and also gives us memories to share as we make our way through the activity. Some suggestions of what they can list include:

   - Items found around their home: bobby pins, stacks of newspapers, grandma's teeth, discount coupons for a Mercedes. (They don’t have to tell the truth.)
   - Items found in their yard: broken rakes, dog bones, hoses coiled like green snakes. (Encourage them to think of comparisons as they list.)
   - Items found in their neighborhood: the corner grocery, Mr. Tate’s beat up Ford Fairlane, the 
   “home base” plum tree.
• Names of Relatives, especially ones that link them to the past: Uncle Einar and Aunt Eva, Claude, the Christensen branch.
• Sayings: "If I’ve told you once..." (The participants often have a good time with this one; they usually have a ready supply that brings you as a facilitator back to your childhood or makes you want to steal their families’ lines.)
• Names of foods and dishes that recall family gatherings: lufefish or tamales or black-eyed peas.
• Names of places they keep their childhood memories: Diaries, boxes, underwear drawers, inside the family Bible, Torah, or Koran.

*Note: The above examples clearly reflect the author’s Norwegian background. We suggest you generate your own personal examples to share with your group in order to bring a personal touch to the activity.*

3. Share the lists out loud as you brainstorm. Encourage them to make their piece “sound like home,” using the names and language of their home, their family, their neighborhood. Those participants who write vague nouns like “shoes” or “magazines,” get more specific when they hear others shout out, “Jet,” “Latina,” “pink tights crusted with rosin.” Out of the chaos, the sounds, smells, and languages of the participants’ homes emerge in poetry.

4. Once they have their lists of specific words, phrases, and names, ask them to write. Encourage them to find some link or phrase like “I am from...” to weave the poem together and to end the poem with a line or two that ties their present to their past, their family history. For example, in Lyon’s poem, she ends with “Under my bed was a dress box/spilling old pictures…I am from those moments...”

5. After the participants have written a draft, “read around.” This is an opportunity for participants to feel “significant and cared about” as they share their poems. To facilitate the process and to make sure that participants get the attention their pieces deserve, have participants write comments about each reader’s piece. Do this to keep them focused on the reader, but remind them it’s also a good way for them to learn about each other and from each other.

6. After everyone has shared their piece, process with the group:

• How do you feel right now?
• Why do you think we did we do this activity?
• Do you see any benefit to our community to share these personal histories?

Be sure to point out (if it doesn’t come up on its own)...

“We all come from rich and diverse backgrounds. Each of us brings unique experiences that are ours alone but that we can share with one another. Be careful not to project your expectations on others because of what you have learned. Rather, seek out more information and ask how something someone has written in their poem has impacted who they are. Where we’re from is often a source of strength and pride and enriches us and our community.”

Optional: Have some supplies available so participants can write out their poem to hang in a common area or by their door.

Attachments: “Where I’m From” worksheet
Excerpts from student poetry
Where I’m From
George Ella Lyon

I am from clothespins, from Clorox and carbon-tetrachloride. 
I am from the dirt under the back porch. 
(Black, glistening it tastes like beets.) 
I am from the forsythia bush, the Dutch elm whose long gone limbs I remember as if they were my own.

I am from fudge and eyeglasses, from Imogene and Alafair. 
I’m from the know-it-alls and the pass-it-ons, from perk up and pipe down. 
I’m from He restoreth my soul with a cottonball lamb and ten verses I can say myself.

I’m from Artemus and Billie’s Branch, 
fried corn and strong coffee. 
From the finger my grandfather lost to the auger the eye my father shut to keep his sight. 
Under my bed was a dress box spilling old pictures, a sift of lost faces to drift beneath my dreams. 
I am from those moments – snapped before I budded – leaf-fall from the family tree.
**Excerpts from student poetry inspired by Lyon’s “Where I’m From”**

I am from bobby pins, doo rags, and wide tooth combs.

I am from prayer plants that lift their stems and rejoice every night.

I am from chocolate cakes and deviled eggs from older cousins and hand-me-downs to “shut ups” and “sit downs”

I am from Genesis to Exodus, Leviticus, too. church to church, pew to pew

I am from a huge family tree that begins with dust and ends with me.

__Oretha Storey__

I am from old pictures and hand sewn quilts.

I am from the Yerba Buena to the old walnut tree that is no more.

I am from carne con chile to queso con tortillas.

I am from farmers and ancient Indians to the frijoles and sopa they ate.

__Lurdes Sandoval__

I am from awapuhi ginger, sweet fields of sugar cane, green bananas.

I am from warm rain cascading over taro leaf umbrellas, crouching beneath the shield of kalo.

I am from poke, brie cheese, mango, and raspberries, from Maruitte and Aunty Nani.

I am from Moore and Cackley from sardines and haupia. From Mirana’s lip Djavan split to the shrunken belly my grandmother could not cure.

__Djamila Moore__

I am from Aztlan where many battles and wars were fought. I am from the strength and courage of the Aztecs who died for our freedom. I am from traditions and customs from posadas to quinceñeras to día de la muerte and buena suerte.

I am from the blood of my ancestors, the dreams of my grandmother, the faith of my mother, and the pride of my culture.

I am from survivors.

__Alejandro Vidales__

I am from the land that struggles for freedom. I am from the rice field, water buffaloes and cows. I am from the place where Blood floats like rivers. Innocent souls are trapped under the ground. Dead bodies haven’t yet been buried. A beautiful barn becomes a cemetery.

It wasn’t supposed to be like this.

I am from the place I hold now only as a memory. I am from a family with hearts like stone.

__Cang Dao__
Where I’m From
by

Smells that paint
pictures in the
mind

A tune that wipes away the years

Memories

home