

# **Cultural Awareness Through Environmental Awareness: The Community**

*Clara Katie Williams*

## **Academic Setting**

This is a language arts/literature unit designed for Harrison Middle School, grades six through eight (approximately sixty students), located in the South Valley of Albuquerque, New Mexico. The student body at Harrison is approximately ninety-five percent Hispanic and five percent Anglo and other ethnicities, including African, Native, and Asian American. The community at Harrison is of a lower socio-economic background. About eighty percent of the students receive free lunches. I have worked with these students in the South Valley for two years, and it is my observation that many have a mindset that they are "just South Valley kids," and that much is not expected of them.

It is my desire to create an opportunity for them to gain an awareness of who they are and how they relate to their environment. We will be collaborating with the social studies and science/math classes. This collaboration will enhance the students' overall knowledge on the topics presented. Each class will be about eighty minutes long. Each unit will last the duration of nine weeks.

## **Goals and Objectives**

This unit is created and developed to

- foster an awareness of the culture, climate, and environment of the the Southwest region.
- create a sense of "place" through literature by Lawrence Buell
- promote an interest in self-identity and self-worth as it relates to the community.
- preserve the past and promote a hope for the future.
- explore literature that complements each topic by referring to text from Willa Cather's *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, John O. West's *Mexican-American Folklore*, Fabiola Cabeza de Baca's *We Fed Them Cactus*, Edward Abbey's *Desert Solitaire*, Gary Paulson's *Hay Meadow*, and Ron Jones' *Acorn People*.
- show the relationship between ethnicity, identity, and the environment.
- show the importance of relationships between generations.
- incorporate the district mandated skills for Language Arts and Literature.

## **Narrative**

Students, and indeed all of us, need a knowledge of our "place." It is often with pride and pleasure that we speak of our own "place." According to Lawrence Buell:

Without a complex knowledge of one's place and without the faithfulness on which such knowledge depends warns Wendell Berry, "it is inevitable that the place will be used carelessly and eventually be destroyed."(1)

When we understand where we come from and what a certain area means to us, it helps us to stay connected to this environment. A sense of ownership prevails, and we tend to defend this area. Some become experts of their region. Although I have long been removed from St. Vincent in the West Indies, the residence of my youth, the area is still alive in my mind. I can recall the stories of my beloved land. I understood the culture of the people, and it helped to mold and shape my character.

It is important that one learns to be connected because it fosters a sense of belonging. This past week I attended a wedding in New York, and I was suddenly immersed in the West Indian culture. I have been away from this culture for over twenty years, but upon my arrival, I felt immediately connected again. Some family members were telling the same stories that they told when we were growing up. It is often said that a place molds us and we mold the place. We are often humbled or exalted by our own sense of identity. We in the United States are usually proud to be called Americans. This title gives a feeling of belonging to one of the greatest nations on Earth.

In our communities, certain landmarks, trees, parks, buildings, and open spaces all seem to evoke some particular memories. To a passerby they may mean nothing, but to someone who has grown up in a specific area, these all have very relevant meanings. Our local environment is definitely part of us.

In busy everyday life we tend to forget our surroundings and the effects that we may have on the environment. By reading environmental literature, we become aware of our surroundings. For example, by studying Thoreau's *Walden: Resistance to Civil Government*, we become interested in nature from his perspective.(2)

Edward Abbey finds his place in the wilderness. He said in his book, *Desert Solitaire*,

Fire. The odor of burning juniper is the sweetest fragrance on the face of the earth, in my honest judgment; I doubt if all the smoking censers of Dante's paradise could equal it. One breathes of juniper smoke like the perfume of sagebrush after rain evokes a magical catalyst, like certain music, the space and light and clarity

and piercing strangeness of the American West. Long  
may it burn.(3)

Even though Abbey was not from the desert, he found his "place," and I just love the passion with which he writes about his barren expanse.

Tayo in Leslie Marmon Silko's Ceremony found peace in his part of the world as he listened to "[t]he buzzing of the grasshopper wings [that] came from the weeds in the yards." He was so in tune with nature that the sound "made his backbone loose [and he] laid back in the red dust on the old mattress and closed his eyes." He was thinking of his lost dreams and had felt "terror at loss of something lost forever;" but then he discovered that nothing "was really lost, all was retained between the sky and the earth and himself....The snow covered mountain remained without regard to titles of ownership or the white ranchers who possessed it"(219). Tayo was at home, and was brought into a sense of "place" in nature. The environment was definitely soothing to him. This was where he belonged (4).

## **Implementation**

These lesson plans will help to demonstrate some of the concepts of this paper and how they can be applied in the classroom.

- Lesson Plan 1: Ancestors
- Lesson Plan 2: Plant Life and Animal Life in New Mexico
- Lesson Plan 3: Geography and Climate of New Mexico
- Lesson Plan 4: Survival in the Desert

The following lesson plans are to be incorporated in four nine-week segments. They are not only for one class period but are thematic units that will span the entire school year.

Each topic, hopefully, will make learning engaging because it will challenge the students as it involves life skills and hands-on activities. It will build character and foster a sense of belonging through team work. It will create an interest in literature and the environment as it relates to community.

The Albuquerque Public School District has a District Core Curriculum and Scope and Sequence for Grades 6-8 (DCCSS) that will be used as a guideline for the skills necessary to be incorporated in the lesson plans. While most skills need repetition, it is important that different skills be covered at least once in keeping with district mandates. Most of the skills listed for each lesson plan will be those stressed for that particular period.

### **Lesson Plan # 1 Ancestors**

Objective

To expand students' knowledge of their ancestry.

To promote student awareness of who they are and where they came from, relating to their environment and literature.

To incorporate selected DCCSS skills.

## DCCSS

### *Listening*

Learners develop active listening strategies (A-1): listen for specific and implied information (1-a), listen to a variety of sources including conversation, music, poetry (1-b), participate in purposeful communication with peers and adults (1-c).

### *Speaking*

Learners communicate orally for a variety of purposes and audiences (B-1): summarize events, stories, ideas, and information (1-a), speak appropriately in social situations (1-b), communicate courteously with people who speak other languages (1-d);

Learners demonstrate speaking skills (B-2): adjust speaking style to audience (2-c), interpret verbal and nonverbal cues given by listeners (2-f), ask clear and relevant questions to elicit additional information (2-g).

### *Reading*

Learners read and gather information from a variety of printed material, literature and own written language (C-1): comprehension (1-b): summarize, make generalizations, and draw conclusions (b-3), predict outcomes (b-6); literature: identify elements of literature: character, setting, plot, structure, mood, and theme (c-3), identify components of poetry: meter, rhythm, rhyme, stanza, and style (c-5); identify the author's point of view (c-7).

### *Writing*

Learners write to convey information and to express individual ideas and understandings (D-1): write paragraphs using correct format and content including introductory, interrelated, and concluding sentences (a-3), apply spelling rules and recognize common misspellings (3-b), edit for content and grammar (3-c), proofread for standard language mechanics (3-d).

## Background

This lesson is based on the idea that there have been two colonizations of New Mexico. The first began in the late 1500's with the arrival of the Spanish Conquistadores who settled in present day Mexico and New Mexico as a territory of Spain.

In the South Valley area, most students are descended from the Spanish, either in Mexico or New Mexico. Anglos are the next largest group, followed by Native

American, Afro-American, and Asian.

### Implementation

- Students will be asked to interview their parents and older family members to gather personal information about their own ancestry.
- Students will visit the South Valley Senior Citizens' Center where students will listen to stories and take notes as they interview senior citizens.
- Students will pair-share and read *Death Comes for the Archbishop* by Willa Cather.

### Assessment

- Students will formulate a list of questions to ask their interviewees.
- Students will present a written report or video of their interviews, and they will be encouraged to share their interviews with the class.
- Students will participate in Festival de Otono (a harvest festival in the South Valley which encourages community pride) contest with either prose or poetry.
- Students will contribute to a literary magazine for the Language Arts Department with songs, poems, prose, or poetry.
- Students will read *Death Comes for the Archbishop* in groups and discuss literary forms, learn vocabulary, and, most importantly, note the environmental, social, and spiritual struggles of the clergy and the people.
- Students will listen and take notes as the teacher reads short excerpts from *Mexican-American Folklore*.

### Materials/Resources

Notebook paper, pencil, and tape recorder or video camera (if possible).

Local adults (relative or community member) will speak to class about their ancestry.

Local performers will present traditional or folk music or dance.

Classroom set of *Death Comes for the Archbishop*.

One copy of *Mexican-American Folklore*.

## **Lesson Plan #2 Plant and Animal Life**

### Objective

To familiarize students with plants and animals of this area.

To foster interdisciplinary cooperation between the Science and Language Arts Department.

To incorporate selected DCCSS skills.

## DCCSS

### *Listening*

Learners develop active listening strategies (A-1): follow directions (a-1), restate/paraphrase (a-4), take accurate notes (a-6), predict, confirm, and integrate (a-7),

### *Speaking*

Learners communicate orally for a variety of purposes and audiences (B-1): demonstrate strategies to clarify meaning (questioning, pausing, emphasizing, and describing) (1-c), group and individual oral reports and presentations (e-1), state ideas clearly with supporting details (1-h), recognize and use techniques of expression to achieve desired effect (1-i),

Learners demonstrate knowledge of grammar, usage, and syntax (B-3), use standard language (3-a), speak using increasingly clear enunciation, volume, tone, rate, expression, and vocabulary (3-b).

### *Reading*

Learners read and gather information from a variety of printed material, literature and own written language (C-1): use word analysis skills including words which represent abstract ideas and concepts (a-5), list events from a selection in sequence (b-2), predict outcomes (b-6), use paraphrasing, scanning, and skimming skills (b-10), use library resources to locate, research, and collect (c-3), use technology to access and apply information (c-4).

### *Writing*

Learners write to convey information and to express individual ideas and understandings (D-1): write in a variety of forms: paragraphs, reports, journals, diaries, stories, letters, poems, dialogue, and essays (a-2), write paragraphs using correct format and content including introductory, interrelated, and concluding sentences (a-3), proofread for standard language mechanics (1-d), learners use technology as a tool for writing (e-2).

## Implementation

- Students will take a walking field trip to bosque and take notes on plant, animals, and birds.
- Students will take a bus to the Rio Grande Zoological Park.
- Students will write a research paper with the help of the Language Arts/Literature teacher and the Science teacher.
- Students will pair-share and read We Fed them Cactus by Fabiola Cabeza de

Baca.

### Assessment

- Students will observe and take notes and sketches of plants and animals which are sighted on the field trip to the Rio Grande Bosque which is within walking distance to the school.
- Students will identify and list the animals native to New Mexico which are observed at the Rio Grande Zoological Park on a field trip.
- Students will share their notes from both field trips and also turn in for a grade.
- Students will work with the Language Arts/Literature teacher, the Science teacher, and the school librarian to write a research paper on their choice of any New Mexico plants or animals.
- Students will read We Fed them Cactus and learn the care of animals and how to relate to parents and other adults.
- Students will add to their vocabulary list (kept on index cards) from words compiled from their research paper and the novel.

### Materials/Resources

- Notebook paper, pencil, pen, computer disk, computer lab, school library, clip board for note-taking in the bosque.
- Classroom set of We Fed them Cactus by Fabiola Cabeza de Baca.

### **Lesson Plan # 3 Geography/Climate of New Mexico**

#### Objective

- To stress to students the Character Counts model for student development.
- To present further practice in graphing and mapping, working with the Social Studies teacher and the Math teacher.
- To learn the importance and significance of New Mexico's geography, including the volcanoes, deserts, mountains, with emphasis on how the mountains affect the climate and how they give us a sense of direction.
- To incorporate selected DCCSS skills.

#### DCCSS

##### *Listening*

Learners develop active listening strategies (A-1): ask relevant questions (a-2), sequence facts (a-3), participate in purposeful communication with peers and adults (1-c), listen to texts by authors of diverse backgrounds (2-a), use media to listen to a variety of literature, dialects, and songs, and cultural presentations (2-b).

##### *Speaking*

Learners communicate orally for a variety of purposes and audiences (B-1), communicate courteously with people who speak other languages (1-d), give multi-step directions to describe a process (2-d), role-playing (e-3), information or directions to demonstrate a process (e-7), use descriptive words and phrases and analyze their importance in oral events (3-c).

### *Reading*

Learners read and gather information from a variety of printed material, literature and own written language (C-1), decoding (a-1), use structural analysis cues (a-2), use letter/sound associations (a-3), summarize, make generalizations, and draw conclusions (b-3), predict outcomes and make judgments and evaluate what is read (b-7), select text from authors of diverse backgrounds (c-2), identify similies, metaphors, and idioms (c-4), determine author's purpose in writing (c-6), identify author's use of dialect.

### *Writing*

Learners read and gather information from a variety of printed material, literature and own written language (C-1): choose appropriate verb tense (c-1), use correct pronouns (c-2), write paragraphs with the main idea and supporting details (c-7), use commas in direct quotations in sentences, to set off items in a series, and to separate non-restrictive clauses (d-2), use quotation marks correctly (d-4), use correct capitalizations (d-5), identify errors related to the use of redundancies, double negatives, and plurals forms (d-6), develop an expository composition (1-e)

### Background

South Valley kids need not only the traits in the Character Counts model, but strength and perserverance, as modeled in Ron Jones' *The Acorn People*, a true account of some severely handicapped kids who overcome great difficulty while at summer camp. Gary Paulson's *Hay Meadow* is also a story of character development as an adolescent youth deals with a sense of loss and loneliness in the mountains.

Students should have a pride in knowing that New Mexico is the fifth largest state in the Union. Only Alaska, Texas, California, and Montana are larger. We all can take pride in knowing that lots of scientific research has been conducted in places like Las Alamos, Sandia Labs, and White Sands Missile Range, and the New Mexico Tech in Socorro ranks number one in its field in the world. Even the atomic bomb was tested here in 1945.

New Mexico has an incredible wealth of mining: copper, gold, natual gas, lead, petroleum, potash, silver, uranium, and zinc.

### Implementation:

- Students will pair-share and read *The Acorn People* and *The Hay Meadow*
- Students will observe and take notes of television weather boadcasters and

role play the meteorologist as they present the state weather forecast to the class the next day.

- Students, working in pairs, must prepare a large state map to accompany their state weather presentation.
- Students will note and sketch their observations (including the temperature difference at the higher elevation) while on the Sandia Mountain field trip.
- Teacher to show video on Southwest.
- Teacher will stress and check for the DCCSS requirements.

### Assessment

- Students will draw a map from the school to their homes, and write the directions to accompany the map.
- Students will read *The Acorn People* and *The Hay Meadow* and list strengths and weaknesses of the characters.
- Students will write poems and essays which compare and contrast the characters in the two texts to the Character Counts model.
- Students will turn in their notes of television weather broadcasters.
- Students, working in pairs, must prepare a large state map to accompany their state weather presentation.
- Students will turn in their notes and sketches of their Sandia Mountain field trip.

### Materials

- Video, TV/VCR, large posterboard for maps, graphing paper.
- Classroom sets of *The Acorn People* and *The Hay Meadow*.
- Paper (lined and clear), pen and pencils, and clipboards for sketching in mountains.
- Character Counts dittos.

## **Lesson Plan # 4 Survival in the Desert**

### Objectives

- To help students learn survival skills in the desert and also in everyday life.
- For students to see the importance of business-letter writing.
- To help students develop a survival mentality rather than a defeated attitude.
- To help students discover that working together toward raising funds is enjoyable.
- To incorporate selected DCCSS skills.

### DCCSS

### *Listening*

Learners develop active listening strategies (A-1): listen for specific and implied information (1-a), participate in purposeful communication with peers and adults (1-c).

### *Speaking*

Learners communicate orally for a variety of purposes and audiences (B-1): demonstrate strategies to clarify meaning (questioning, pausing, emphasizing, and describing) (1-c), speak clearly and use standard pronunciation (2-a), adjust speaking style to audience (2-c).

### *Reading*

Learners read and gather information from a variety of printed material, literature and own written language (C-1): use format and visual clues to decode (a-1), use grammar to decode (a-4), use word analysis skills including words which represent abstract ideas and concepts (a-5), recall and apply details and information to comprehend (b-1), summarize, make generalizations, and draw conclusions (b-3), recognize cause and effect (b-5), recognize fact and opinion (b-8), identify bias (c-9).

### *Writing*

Learners write to convey information and to express individual ideas and understandings (D-1): write for specified purposes including narration, description, persuasion, responses to literature, and personal correspondence (1-a), choose correct homonyms (c-4), use adjectives, adverbs, and conjunctions correctly (c-5), choose expressions that are grammatically correct and clear (c-8), proofread for standard language mechanics (1-d), use apostrophes correctly (d-3), use correct capitalization (d-5), develop an expository composition: introduction, body, and conclusion (1-e), learners use technology as a tool for writing (D-2).

### Background

This unit will help students to see the value in business-letter writing and fund raising, and it will help them to be a participant in community affairs. It will show that we get monetary and social results when we're willing to work, and that work can be socially rewarding — many hands make light work. Many of the students have never been out of Albuquerque, so this field trip will be an eye opener for them.

### Implementation

- Students will be asked to approach local businesses for monetary support for field trip.
- Ask social studies class to go with us on field trip to Ice Caves and Inscription Rock at El Morro National Monument on Highway 53, southwest of Grants.

- Have someone from the military reserves speak to the students regarding survival in the New Mexico desert.
- Encourage students to participate in a school cafeteria "Coffee House" where their poetry and prose is read or displayed on a week night.
- Students will pair-share and read Edward Abbey's *Desert Solitaire*.

#### Assessment

- Students will write business letters of request and thanks to local merchants for support of a field trip culminating the survival unit.
- Students will write poetry and essays about personal survival — what they've learned personally and from the text and would like to share.
- Students will add to their vocabulary cards words taken from *Desert Solitaire*.

#### Materials/Resources

- Guest speaker from the military reserves.
- Paper, pen, pencil.
- Classroom set of *Desert Solitaire*.

#### Conclusion

It is my hope that after we've worked with this unit all year, the students will indeed have secured a sense of "place," both with nature and the community, that they would take a greater interest in literature and their environment, and that they would become well adjusted, active participants in the community.

My desire is that this unit would change the predominant South Valley youth mentality that they are just South Valley kids. May they see that they are as important as anyone else and can make a contribution to society wherever they are.

#### Notes

1. Buell, Lawrence. *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. 1995.
2. Thoreau, Henry D. *Walden: Resistance to Civil Government*. NY: W.W. Norton & Co, Inc. 1988.
3. Abbey, Edward. *Desert Solitaire*. NY: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1968.
4. Silko, Leslie Marmon. *Ceremony*. NY: The Viking Press, 1977.

#### Student's Annotated Bibliography

Abbey, Edward. *Desert Solitaire*. NY: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1968.  
Edward Abbey left his home in the East and traveled to New Mexico to work in

the wilderness as a park ranger. He found his place here.

Anaya, Rudolfo. *Bless Me Ultima*. NY: Warner Books, Inc., 1972.

A young boy of six years old is fascinated with a healer named Ultima. He learns much about the world from her, and she delivers his soul into the world.

Candia Coleman, Jane. *Stories from Mesa County*. Athens: Swallow Press/Ohio University Press, 1991.

There are stories about the Southwest which would appeal to young children.

Cabeza de Baca, Fabiola. *We Fed Them Cactus*. Albuquerque: UNM Press, 1954.

Stories of a young man's relationship to his father and about family life on the plains between Albuquerque and Texas. This area is called the Llano.

Fairman, Tony. *Bury My Bones but Keep my Words*. NY: Puffin Books, 1991.

Thirteen humorous, tales of excitement from Africa.

Jones, Ron. *The Acorn People*. NY: Bantam Books, 1977.

The struggles that some handicapped children in wheel chairs glean as they attempt life at a summer camp.

Loeffler, Jack and Lamadrid, Enrique. *La Musica de los Viejitos*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1999.

Music of the north Rio Grande, sung by older citizens of the region: a combination of religious and secular music from the sixteenth century. Spanish and Mexican folk songs.

Marquez, Antonio and Anaya, Rudolfo. *Cuentos Chicanos: A Short Story Anthology*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1984.

Tales of the Chicano people what will appeal to children, especially of the Hispanic origin.

Mellin, Lilace A. "Helping Adolescents Make It Home." *The English Journal*: 86 (November, 1997), pp. 80-85.

Paulson, Gary. *Hay Meadow*. NY: Bantam-Doubleday, 1992.

A story of adolescent loneliness and reconciliation and the adventures experienced in a mountain meadow.

Steinbeck, John. *The Grapes of Wrath*. NY: Penquin Books, 1939.

A family from Oklahoma faces the reality of the hard life following the Depression, as they were driven from their home to California along with thousands of others.

West, John O. *Mexican-American Folklore*. Little Rock: August House, Inc., 1988.

About legends, song, festivals, proverbs, and crafts. There are tales of the saints of revolution.

## **Teacher's Bibliography**

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Anulua, Gloria. *Frontier Border Lands*. San Francisco: New Mestiza, 1987.

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Cabeza de Baca, Fabiola. *We Fed Them Cactus*. Albuquerque: UNM Press, 1954.

Cather, Willa. *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. NY: Vintage Books, 1927.

Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *Selected Essays*. NY: Penquin Books USA Inc., 1982.

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*Albuquerque Public Schools: District Core Curriculum and Scope and Sequence*. Instructional Support Systems, 1998.

West, John O. *Mexican-American Folklore*. Little Rock: August House, Inc., 1988.

## **Maps**

Map of Cibola National Forest New Mexico , US Department of Agriculture, Forest Service Sothwestern Region.

Mapouest.Com National Geographic Road Atlas Unites States

McFadden, Les: The Albuquerque Teachers' Institute: Environmental Impact of Human Settlement and Urbanization of the Albuquerque Region ATI (1999)