



# Using Digital Narratives to Reflect on Individual and Group Identities

Curriculum Guide

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## WHY NARRATIVES?

I am just finishing up my sixth year of teaching high school English. When I first started teaching, I idolized the student centered classroom. Bell hooks convinced me that this was the most life giving and transformative way to teach. And while I still know this to be true, when I entered the traditional public school classroom as a small, white, female teacher, on day one of year one, the students' and my own socialization unconsciously kicked in. I found myself shushing students, reminding them to raise their hands, asking them to be quiet, becoming defensive when students challenged my authority, and telling them when they could move from their desks. I clung to the shreds of an existing curriculum that remained after the department's decision to eliminate textbooks. And while this wasn't a bad decision, as a new teacher feeling powerless and struggling to maintain order, I felt like I was drowning. While trying to maintain what I perceived to be the expectations of a successful classroom (quiet, attentive, thoughtful, following my every instruction), I leaned into the canonical texts I was already familiar with as I created my curriculum: *The Catcher in the Rye*, *Of Mice and Men*, *The Odyssey*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and the like. The department did encourage contemporary and Young Adult Literature, too. This genre was seen as a way to hook students and engage them in reading. We included *13 Reasons Why*, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Nighttime*, and *Tuesdays with Morrie*.

*This must be a great curriculum, I thought to myself. It features old and new texts that I am familiar with and feel competent teaching. I will present these to students and dazzle them with these literary windows into the human experience! I will strike the perfect balance of leading students through the texts, maintaining the expected traditional sense of order in my classroom, and letting students follow their own interests.*

The reality, of course, was much different. My students did read (or appear to read) the assigned texts. Almost all students completed assignments and participated in the class discussions. But it seemed that the percentage of students who were really engaged was about what it always is in an English classroom. The percentage of students who were transformed through engaging with this literature was, at least in an immediate, visible sense, was microscopic. This blend of conical and contemporary literature seemed to generate the same outcome. It felt exhausting, and even though it was interesting and enjoyable in moments, the norm was not joy, delight, or psychic transformation. The reading and writing activities felt performative for both myself and the students. It was an unspoken transaction in the subconscious of the student: the teacher assigns the work, I complete it, I have learned something. Really, this was my subconscious understanding, too, even though I logically knew that this was not how transformative learning happens.

Now, still with bell hooks in mind, I am untangling my own ego from my role as a teacher and truly dismantling what it means to hold space for a student centered learning space. It should be a space where students are given the opportunity to grapple with genuinely challenging topics, question themselves, and evolve their own consciousness. **The curriculum that I include in this plan is designed to facilitate this kind of classroom space. Most importantly, this curriculum positions the student and their individual experiences at the front of the curriculum, instead of as a follow up to the reading and writing standards. To do this, student narratives (both digital and written) are emphasized and intertwined throughout the entire writing curriculum.**

Specifically, these unit plans are designed for ninth grade students in a Honors English I class. They fit with some of the traditional themes explored with freshman students: "The American Dream," "Identity," "Prejudice," "Love," and "The Hero's Journey."

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## Curriculum Goals

### Unit 1

- Students will use literature and whole class discussions to become conscious of traditional American socialization
- Students will understand how people of different age groups conceptualize identity
- Students will become conscious of their own beliefs and biases
- Students will create a digital narrative about an important aspect of their identity

### Unit 2

- Students will discuss one's individual perspectives about identity with family members of different ages
- Students will create unique individual digital narratives that disrupt the status quo socialization (i.e., they are specifically anti-racist, anti-sexist, anti-classist, etc...).
- Students will create a digital narrative about a family member and an informative essay about a related topic

### Unit 3

- Students will become conscious of the collective values of their own communities
  - Students will work with family and community members to create a podcast about the heroes that different age groups have
  - Students will write an argumentative essay inspired by what they learned from their class podcast
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### Context

The unit plans that I describe in this document are situated within the framework of Kelly Gallagher and Penny Kittle’s writing instruction philosophy outlined in their book *180 Days: Two Teachers and the Quest to Engage and Empower Adolescents*. So my unit plans can be understood to compliment or specifically tailor their reading and writing philosophies and lessons to an English I classroom that is heavily utilizing narrative writing and digital technology to spark student curiosity and transformation. The daily rhythm of my classroom is patterned after Gallagher and Kittle’s daily schedule outlined in *180 Days*:

10 minutes	Read: Students read their chosen novel on their own while the teacher holds brief reading conferences with individual students
8 minutes	Write: The teacher gives students a writing prompt that connects with the specific genre or theme being studied. The teacher is also writing under a document camera so that students can see this skill being modeled.
2 minutes	Quick Edits: Students and the teacher use Gallagher’s RADAR method to edit their writing.
10 minutes	Discuss: The teacher and students are invited to share their writing or to talk about their writing. OR Mini Lesson or Passage Study: The teacher models or teaches a specific skill
20 minutes	Evolving Draft: Students have the remainder of the time to work on their ongoing writing project. The teacher checks in with individual students about their progress during this time.

### Adaptability

Overall, these unit plans leave a lot of space for the teacher and students to tailor them to their specific class’ interests and needs, but provide a framework to blend digital narratives into core reading and writing curriculum.