



Lesson Plan: *90 Miles* Immigrant Journeys

OBJECTIVES

This lesson will help students:

- learn to analyze an autobiographical text
- understand the importance of historical context
- gain knowledge about Cuba and Cuba/U.S. relations
- consider the experience of immigrants to the U.S.

GRADE LEVEL

9 - adult

MATERIALS

"Analyzing an Autobiography" handout
VHS copy of *90 Miles*

ESTIMATED TIME NEEDED

Three to five hours

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Because of its proximity to the United States, Cuba has been a lightning rod for Cold War politics. When the Cold War ended, many people felt the need to re-examine U.S.-Cuban relations and policies. That re-assessment has been influenced by a large and vibrant immigrant population of Cubans who fled the Castro government and resettled in the United States, mostly in Florida.

The film *90 Miles* recounts the tale of one of those immigrants and a journey, not only from the physical shores of Cuba to the beaches of Miami, but also from being a communist Cuban youth to becoming a Cuban-American citizen. Juan Carlos Zaldivar's engaging autobiographical film provides an excellent cornerstone for lessons that integrate language arts and social studies. The story of the Zaldivar family can help students examine autobiography, immigration, U.S. foreign policy, family relationships, Cuba, and the importance of nationality and ethnicity in shaping one's identity.

ACTIVITY

Dragnet notwithstanding, analysis is more than "just the facts, ma'am." This lesson is designed to help students get beyond simply summarizing who, what, when, and where to deeply examine an autobiographical text.

Step 1: Ask students to imagine that they had written an autobiography and that an historian was being asked to write a short background piece for the book's introduction to help supply readers with a context for understanding the student's life. What kinds of information would they expect to find in the historian's piece? If you have assigned a book in your class that contains such a background piece, you may want to have students re-read it with an eye towards the type of

information that is included. The list should probably include major historical, political, social, and cultural events that created the environment in which the student lives.

Record the list generated by the class someplace where it can remain visible throughout the lesson. As the list is being generated, be sure to ask students to explain why they think the things they put on the list are important to include. When the list is complete, discuss how contextual information helps one better understand an autobiography.

Step 2: Introduce *90 Miles* by telling students they are going to see an autobiography about a person who came to the U.S. from Cuba and that you are going to fill in some of the historical context. Give a brief lecture on Cuba. What you actually say will depend on what your students already know about the topic, but by the end of your talk, students should be able to answer these questions:

- What was the Cuban Revolution about and when did it occur?
- Who was Batista?
- Who is Fidel Castro?
- What was the Mariel Boatlift and when did it occur?
- What were U.S./Cuban relations like during Batista's rule? How did they change after the Revolution? What are they like now?

Background information on Cuba is available on the *90 Miles* website:

<http://www.pbs.org/pov/pov2003/90miles/resources.html>

Step 3: Tell students that they are going to view *90 Miles* and that after the film they will be asked to identify the basics about the filmmaker and answer the questions on the Analyzing an Autobiography handout. Distribute a copy of the handout to each student.

Step 4: Show the film *90 Miles*. The film is 53 minutes long. It is recommended that you show the film in its entirety because you are essentially using it as a text (much the same way you would assign a novel). If time constraints make it impossible to view it in one sitting, divide viewing into two sessions, stopping the film about half way through, just before Juan Carlos makes his first visit to Cuba. A good pause point is just after Juan Carlos says: "The thought of going back to Cuba frightened me. But after eighteen years of seeing my dad unhappy, I thought it was worth the risk." Note: The film is also available in Spanish for use in ESL or bilingual programs.

Step 5: Have students share their answers to the questions on the "Analyzing an Autobiography" handout. Depending on available time and the skill level of your students, they can complete this assignment in writing as homework, complete the handout in small groups, or discuss the questions in class with everyone. Note: The filmmaker, Juan Carlos Zaldívar is gay and makes a brief reference to that in the film. Teachers should be prepared to deal with the possibility that this will come up as a topic in the discussion.

Additional discussion questions for the film are available in the film's Discussion Guide:

<http://www.pbs.org/pov/pov2003/90miles/resources.html>

ASSESSMENT

Substitute the word "filmmaker" with the word "author" in the list of questions for analysis and ask students to apply the questions to a printed autobiography tied to your curriculum. An autobiography of an immigrant to the U.S. would make for the best comparison, but it is

important to tie this exercise to existing curriculum by either choosing something that is already on the required reading list for Language Arts, or a book that is connected to a required Social Studies topic. There are many, many possible titles (e.g., Anzia Yezierska's *Bread Givers*, Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, Victor Villasenor's *Rain of Gold*, etc.). For a handy list of recent autobiographies by Americans with multiple cultural identities, see: http://www.hancock.cc.ca.us/peopledir/fac_pages/kadams/autobio.html.

EXTENSIONS & ADAPTATIONS

Have students compare the differences between a printed text and a film as text.

Ask students begin to writing their own autobiography, beginning by answering "What have been the pivotal moments in your life?" You might also invite them to check the section of the *90 Miles* website in which filmmaker Juan Carlos Zaldívar writes about what it was like for him to tell his story: <http://www.pbs.org/pov/pov2003/90miles/behind.html>

Rather than supplying information on Cuba yourself, have students watch *90 Miles* and then, using the questions they generated in Step 1, research and write a short historical "backgrounder" for the film. After they have written their backgrounders, discuss how knowing what they know now (that they didn't know before viewing the film) helps them better understand the events that Juan Carlos Zaldívar recounts.

Involve students in producing their own film by turning a diary entry into a film. Talk about how a diary differs from an autobiography.

Use *90 Miles* to explore the experience of immigrants. Ask students to consider the following factors and compare what they see in the film to the experience of immigrants they know or have read about:

- Place of origin / birth
- Historical circumstance
- Reason for leaving
- Circumstances of departure
- Length / method of trip
- Language / knowledge of English
- Job skills / training / education level
- Expectations
- Family situation
- Age
- Gender

To find other immigrant stories, you may want to visit <http://www.pbs.org/kcet/newamericans/>.

Invite first generation immigrants from your community into your classroom to share their stories. Compare their experience with the experience of the Zaldívar family. Or view the P.O.V. film, *The Sixth Section*, and compare the experience of the illegal Mexican immigrants you see in that film to the experiences you see in *90 Miles*.

Research and discuss U.S. immigration policy. How does the law treat Cubans differently from other immigrants? How does the law treat gays differently from heterosexuals? Do you think the policies are appropriate? Why or why not?

Research and discuss U.S. policy towards Cuba. Why did the U.S. begin an economic embargo? Why does that embargo continue today? Why do some people think that the U.S. should be pursuing a policy of economic engagement with the Castro government?

RESOURCES

See: <http://www.pbs.org/pov/pov2003/90miles/resources.html>.

STANDARDS

Main standards covered include:

Language Arts – Reading

Standard 6: Uses reading skills and strategies to understand and interpret a variety of literary texts.

8. Understands relationships between literature and its historical period, culture, and society (e.g., influence of historical context on form, style, and point of view; influence of literature on political events; social influences on author's description of characters, plot, and setting; how writer's represent and reveal their cultures and traditions).

Language Arts – Viewing

Standard 9: Uses viewing skills and strategies to understand and interpret visual media.

U.S. History, Era 6 - (1870-1900) & Era 10 - (1968 to the present)

Standard 17: Understands massive immigration after 1870 and how new social patterns, conflicts, and ideas of national unity developed amid growing cultural diversity.

1. Understands challenges immigrants faced in society in the late 19th century (e.g., experiences of new immigrants from 1870 to 1900, reasons for hostility toward the new immigrants, restrictive measures against immigrants, the tension between American ideals and reality)
2. Understands the influence of public education on American society after 1870 (e.g., the role of public and parochial schools in integrating immigrants into mainstream America, how the rise of public education and voluntary organizations promoted national unity and American values)

Standard 31: Understands economic, social, and cultural developments in the contemporary United States.

2. Understands how recent immigration and migration patterns impacted social and political issues (e.g., major issues that affect immigrants and resulting conflicts; changes in the size and composition of the traditional American family; demographic and residential mobility since 1970)

Additional relevant standards include:

Language Arts – Reading

Standard 5: Uses the general skills and strategies of the reading process.

Language Arts - Writing

Standard 1: Uses the general skills and strategies of the writing process.

Standard 4: Gathers and uses information for research purposes.

Language Arts - Media

Standard 10: Understands the characteristics and components of the media

3. Understands aspects of the construction of media messages and products (e.g., the significance of all parts of a visual text, such as how a title might tie in with main characters or themes)