LESSON PLAN
Humanizing Immigrant Stories

OVERVIEW
Debates over U.S. immigration policy, and the xenophobia that often accompanies such debates, are once again center stage. Policy debates are often dominated by statistics and stereotypes, both of which can dehumanize those under examination. This lesson brings the personal stories of migrants back into the debate. As a springboard for discussion, it uses clips from Voices of the Sea, a film about a Cuban family divided on whether or not to emigrate. After researching the history or current situation in a nation from which people have emigrated to the U.S. in large numbers, students will write an imagined dialogue between family members considering whether to make the journey. In the process, they’ll consider what motivates people to leave their homes or stay.

OBJECTIVES
In this lesson, students will:
- Learn the general history of immigration to the U.S. from Castro’s Cuba
- Write an imagined dialogue
- Gain insight that can inform their thinking on current debates about how the U.S. should treat immigrants

GRADE LEVELS: 9-10

SUBJECT AREAS
Research Skills
English/Language Arts
Global Studies

MATERIALS
- Film clips from Voices of the Sea and the equipment to screen them
- Hard copy handout or Internet access of general history of Cuban immigration (see links below)
- Internet access for research

ESTIMATED TIME NEEDED
One class period plus homework

FILM CLIPS
Film clips provided in this lesson are from the film Voices of the Sea by Kim Hopkins. Access the streaming clips for free on POV’s website by visiting www.pbs.org/pov/educators. Borrow the full film from our DVD Lending Library by joining the POV Community Network: http://communitynetwork.amdoc.org.

Clip 1: Getting to Know the Family (2:30 min.)
The clip begins at 4:52 with Pita showing a picture he identifies as his cousins. It ends at approximately 7:17, just after Mariela says “Don’t look for anything else.” We meet Mariela, Pita
and the children, as well as get a glimpse into their lives, including apparently routine power outages. Pita shows pictures of his family, who fled Cuba. He says that he hasn’t seen his father in forty years.

**Clip 2: Failed Attempts (5:10 min.)**
The clip begins at 16:28 with Mariela quoting a revolution slogan: “For the humble and by the humble.” It ends at 21:38 as Mariela kisses Pita and walks inside. The clip includes people repairing what they have because they can’t afford to replace it. We also learn that Mariela once tried to leave, but her attempt to make it to the U.S. failed within site of the coast. The clip also covers reasons that people leave, including the hope of a better life for the children and the belief that the U.S. will offer benefits and work opportunities.

**Clip 3: Cubans Don’t Hate Cuba (2:25 min.)**
The clip begins at 34:41 when Mariela says “It was completely unexpected.” It ends at 37:06 with a wide shot of the house and of the car in the dark. We learn that Mariela’s brother Roilan has fled and no one has heard from him yet. Pita questions the rosy picture that so many Cubans have of life in the U.S. Mariela makes the case that Cubans don’t leave because they hate their country; they leave for opportunities and hope to return.

**Clip 4: Talking with Roilan (5:50 min.)**
The clip begins at 45:00 with a long shot of the street at twilight. It ends at 50:50 after Mariela says, “Maybe it could be good. Maybe.” Mariela talks to Roilan, who has reached the U.S. safely and is working as a landscaper in Arizona. Pita says he would support his wife’s dream to leave but doubts that she would be as successful as she imagines.

**ACTIVITY**
**Pre-requisite:** Either in class or as homework prior to the lesson, ask students to read a general history of Cuban immigration to the U.S. since the rise of Castro in 1959. This could be the Background Information section of *POV’s discussion guide for Voices of the Sea*, one of the Resources listed in this lesson plan, or even Wikipedia. Your choice should reflect the reading level and research skills of your students.

**Step 1: The Assignment**
Ask students what they know about current immigration issues facing the U.S. – not their opinions; just the issues people are debating.

After a very brief discussion (including any clarifications you might need to offer), explain to students they are going to do a writing exercise that asks them to think about why people emigrate from their home countries.

Give them the assignment:
- In dialogue form, script a conversation between people deciding whether or not to migrate to the U.S. (Based on the skill level of your students, you can determine the minimum length required).
- There must be at least two people involved in the conversation, but it is okay to include more. The conversation could be between spouses, friends, parents and children – whomever you wish. The people can be from any country you choose.
- The dialogue should reflect the realities of the country you choose (i.e., the reader/listener should know what nation the people are from). You will need to research
what is happening/has happened in the country you choose in order to make your dialogue realistic.

- You can choose the year.* (*If the class has been studying a particular time period, you may want to require that the dialogue takes place during that era).

Let students know the due date.

**Step 2: Cuba**
To help students prepare, tell them you are going to share with them clips from a documentary – *Voices of the Sea* – that features a wife and husband who currently live in Cuba and are contemplating leaving as they watch friends and family emigrate. Mariela is in her thirties and the mother of four. Pita, her second husband, is older and a third generation fisherman.

To provide context for the clips, ask what students learned from their reading on the general history of migration from Cuba. Be sure they understand the special status that Cuban immigrants have enjoyed in the U.S. (and the reason for that special treatment), the “wet foot, dry foot” policy, and the current policy.

**Step 3: The Video Clips**
As they view each clip, students should pay attention to the issues that Mariela and Pita discuss. What factors are important to them? Is their decision easy or difficult? What do they say or do that lets you know how they feel, as well as what they think?

Show the four clips, pausing briefly after each so students may share reactions.

After the final clip, ask students to choose countries and time periods and, as time allows, let them start researching and writing.

**[Optional] Step 4: Reflection**
On the day that students turn in their dialogues, give them time to do a free write reflection on the relationship between the assignment and current events. What did they learn about why people choose to leave their own countries and come to the U.S.? Is that decision typically easy or difficult? How do their new insights influence their thinking about current immigration policy and how the U.S. should handle immigrants or refugees?

**EXTENSIONS / ADAPTATIONS**
Craft one or more of the student dialogues into a short play and perform it.

Research and share family and/or community oral histories from people who emigrated to the U.S.

Compare/contrast work from the lesson with at least three different mainstream media depictions of immigrants.

Read a literary version of an immigrant story (e.g., Anzia Yezierska's *Bread Givers*, Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, Victor Villasenor's *Rain of Gold*, or one of the titles from POV’s [Delve Deeper Reading List](#) for *Voices of the Sea*).

Assign students to investigate the legal difference between “immigrant” and “refugee.” Write position papers on current U.S. policy on admission of each group.
Engage in a more in-depth examination of Cuba’s history.

RESOURCES

POV: Voices of the Sea
http://www.pbs.org/pov/voicesofthesea/discussion-guide - The site includes a general discussion guide with additional activity ideas.

Pew Research Center
pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/01/13/cuban-immigration-to-u-s-surges-as-relations-warm/ - Details of Cuban immigration to the U.S. since the Obama Administration began normalizing relations with Cuba.

Migration Policy Institute
migrationpolicy.org/article/cuban-immigrants-united-states - An overview of Cuban migration to the U.S.

POV: Media Literacy Questions for Analyzing POV Films
http://www.pbs.org/pov/educators/media-literacy.php
This list of questions provides a useful starting point for leading rich discussions that challenge students to think critically about documentaries.

STANDARDS
Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects
(http://www.corestandards.org/assets/CCSSI_ELA%20Standards.pdf)

**W.9-10.3** Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

**W.9-10.7**
Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question) or solve a problem; narrow or broaden the inquiry when appropriate; synthesize multiple sources on the subject, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.

**SL.11-12.6** Adapt speech to a variety of contexts and tasks, demonstrating a command of formal English when indicated or appropriate.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Faith Rogow, Ph.D., is the co-author of *The Teacher’s Guide to Media Literacy: Critical Thinking in a Multimedia World* (Corwin 2012) and was past president of the National Association for Media Literacy Education. She has written discussion guides and lesson plans for more than 250 independent films.