**Title of Lesson:** Gandhi’s Autobiography and the Study of Memoir

**Lesson By:** Sheri Halpern

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<th>Grade Level/ Subject Areas:</th>
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<tr>
<td>6th Grade/ English Language Arts</td>
<td>25-35</td>
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**Goals/ Objectives of Lesson:**
- Students will be able to explore the life of Gandhi through a read-aloud
- Students will be able to demonstrate listening, note-taking, and proper behavior for read-aloud
- Students will be able to identify literary techniques in Gandhi’s writing
- Students will be able to apply these literary techniques to their memoirs in Writer’s Workshop

**Lesson Abstract:**
This lesson shall serve to introduce about thirty sixth grade students to Gandhi’s literary voice. It will differentiate Gandhi’s “autobiography” from other autobiographies studied throughout the New York State and Teachers’ College (Workshop Model) English Language Arts curriculum. Further, it will serve to motivate and empower students to experiment with reflection in their personal memoir. An enduring understanding will be that reflection on “experiments” in one’s life will distinguish his or her memoirs from more traditional autobiographies.

**Lesson Content:**
The background knowledge for this lesson is quite manageable since the workshop model already factors into it the wide range of ability levels that could exist in a classroom. English Language Arts lessons designed for the Teachers’ College Workshop Model hinge on the idea of teaching each student as his or her “just right” level for reading. Writing Workshop is similarly independent, leaving students the freedom to log relatively freely in their writers’ notebooks.

The memoir, like an autobiography, is a genre of writing written in the first person. Where an autobiography generally spans the entire life of the subject, a memoir generally zooms in on a more specific aspect of the life of the subject. The voice of the subject can shed light on this aspect of his or her life or character. Even though Gandhi’s autobiography is widely accepted as such, it also contains this element of memoir; he himself states that the label “autobiography” is irrelevant to the book, as he is merely documenting his experiments with truth, which, in turn, constitute his life.

Gandhi’s autobiography is unique in that it depicts the life of one of the most universally quoted and loved social leaders, yet conveys an almost unbelievable sense of humility – if not for his
extraordinarily believable tone. Seeing these open, honest, and selfless words will convey to students that Gandhi was a regular person who made mistakes and learned just like all of us. Beyond that, his writing can serve as inspiration to us in all facets of our every day life – not only when attempting to conquer large social injustices. (In fact, according to his conception of swaraj, empowerment must be present in the individual and even mundane level in order to successfully conquer larger social injustices.)

The following constitutes the first paragraph of his introduction to his “Experiments with Truth,” which will serve as content for the read-aloud:

“Four or five years ago, at the instance of some of my nearest co-workers, I agreed to write my autobiography. I made the start, but scarcely had I turned over the first sheet when riots broke out in Bombay and the work remained at a standstill. Then followed a series of events which culminated in my imprisonment at Yeravda. Sjt. Jeramdas, who was one of my fellow-prisoners there, asked me to put everything else on one side and finish writing the autobiography. I replied that I had already framed a programme of study for myself, and that I could not think of doing anything else until this course was complete. I should indeed have finished the autobiography had I gone through my full term of imprisonment at Yeravda, for there was still a year left to complete the task, when I was discharged. Swami Anand has now repeated the proposal, and as I have finished the history of Satyagraha in South Africa, I am tempted to undertake the autobiography for Navijivan. The Swani wanted me to write it separately for publication as a book. But I have no spare time. I could only write a chapter week by week. Why should it not be the autobiography? The Swami agreed to the proposal, and here I am hard at work.”

Gandhi here explains his personal reasons for writing an autobiography, thereby pushing students’ conception of what an autobiography can entail. We add to our running definition of the term for the unit and examine the tone Gandhi sets at the onset of his work. This reflective tone is characteristic of the Teachers College memoir template, and we can emulate it in our own independent writing endeavors.

New York State Content Standards (6th Grade English Language Arts – Teachers College/workshop model curriculum):

- Good readers maintain attention through read-alouds
- Good readers look for literary elements during read-alouds and take notes during think-alouds
- Good writers of memoir inject their reflections onto their experiences rather than merely describing a sequence of events
- Good writers of memoir convey emotions through the use of tone

Guiding Questions:

- What emotions does Gandhi show rather than tell in his writing through the use of tone?
- What is the significance of a title of an autobiography?
- How can I enhance my memoir by using tone and other literary techniques?
**Materials Needed:**
- Copy of Gandhi’s autobiography
- Chart paper
- Markers
- Overhead (optional alternative for chart paper)

**Lesson Context:**
This lesson will fit into a unit on memoir writing and is intended to complement a Social Studies unit on the forms of democracy that have existed throughout history and across various places. The use of this English Language Arts lesson in conjunction with the lesson “Gandhi’s Swaraj: Power to the People” is especially appropriate for an integrated humanities curriculum. It can be followed up with future read-alouds from Gandhi’s writings to complement the social studies curriculum, or a Second Step nonviolence education curriculum.

**Teaching Activities:**
Charting new vocabulary words, teacher think-aloud, class read-aloud, student think-aloud, small group discussion, independent writers’ workshop, etc.

**Assessment/ Evaluation:**
Students will show mastery on written assessment by citing at least three instances in their memoir where they reflected (like Gandhi did) and conveyed an emotion through a change in tone.

**Extension Activities/ Enrichment:**
While this lesson is intended primarily to better acquaint each student with his or her “writer-ly” self, if they choose to share their entries from Writer’s Workshop, it could have profound effects on those with whom it was shared. When combined with “Gandhi’s Swaraj: Power to the People,” students are encouraged to write in order to bring about social change in their local community or express their opinions on a pertinent social issue. There will be a publishing party at the end of the unit, to which all family members and friends will be invited.

**Bibliography:**