

Biography: Gateway to Learning and Literacy

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For youth, biography exerts an enormous influence on information about current society and how youth can live productive lives. Biography offers a means of gaining knowledge, but it also is an avenue that helps youth monitor their own lives and values. Biographical resources are abundant, and this vast resource assures that biography will always play a paramount role in how youth learn about themselves and how they gain new knowledge and insights about the world. Teacher-librarians and teachers play important, collaborative roles in making good biographical materials available and helping youth learn how to use biography for learning and enjoyment.

Biography, Personal Development, Collaboration

Introduction

Biography it is a powerful avenue for learning; and biography has an enormous influence on information about current societies and how youth can live productive lives within them. For youth, biography offers a means of gaining knowledge, but it also is an avenue that helps them monitor their own lives and values. In modern societies, biography impinges on political and social discourse and it is often framed by celebratory media-driven popular culture. Celebrity biography, aided by television, sports, and music is a hallmark of twenty-first century life. Although celebrity biography is important in the lives of most youth, it is only one form of biography among a vast array of biographical information. This vast array of materials assures that biography will always play a paramount role learning in the development and maintaining of school library collections. The question is how do we manage it in productive ways so that it contributes to learning and the developing of literacy? How do we begin this important discussion? I suggest that we begin with a look at national biography. All nations have a national biography and this can be used well to promote learning and literacy.

National Biography and Social Dialogue

National biography arises from a nation's history, current affairs and popular culture. A national biography influences and shapes a sense of national identity and it celebrates national values. Modern mass media, for good or bad, throughout the world contributes greatly to the shaping of national biography in that it helps develop a sense of national character and identity and it plays important roles in framing and sustaining a sense of national pride and purpose. Good examples of this are found in sports. National pride often comes from a winning team in international competition and also from the achievement of success that comes from a native son or daughter associated with a country. In the United States, we have many examples of this

including those of Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger a native of Austria and Senator Obama, whose ancestry is linked to Kenya.

Elements in a National Biography

Often a nation's biography is presented and codified in august, scholarly reference works such as the *Dictionary of National Biography* (DNB) for Great Britain and countries closely tied to it through history. The *Dictionary of American Biography* (DAB) gives similar attention to important Americans and others closely associated with the development of the United States. Subjects covered in the DNB and DAB are notable for their variety. Biographies range from men and women of laudatory stature to criminals. Such variety of coverage is one of the hallmarks of a national biography--it reflects national identity, character, and national conflicts. A nation is never perfect, and personalities that make up its national biography are not perfect. Biography reflects hidden desires, collective anxieties, human weaknesses and all the drama and suspense of life (Pardes). Teachers and librarians can use these imperfections to help build critical thinking skills and literacy.

Biography is a useful tool in developing nationalism, but critical thinking as a major component of learning requires us to look very closely at the role of nationalism in modern societies. We should always remember the words of Nobel Laureate Albert Schweitzer when he said that the worse kinds of nationalism separate people (Schweitzer). National biography also reflects the psychology of nation. Psychology of a nation is its collective behavior and mental characteristics. Nations can exhibit characteristics of racism, xenophobia, sexism, and other forms of fear and hatred as well as a sense of humanity, openness, justice, fairness and trust. Again, learning and critical thinking skills using biography play a role in helping youth understand forces that form a national psychology.

National biographies written for youth tend to reflect much of what is expected of youth within their societies. Questions of how individualism is viewed within a nation and how youth are encouraged and expected to develop their identities, values, and loyalties in accordance of national purposes and goals are systematically presented in biographies for youth. I would now like to consider some of the major forces in biography today and now teacher-librarians and teachers can use them to better promote learning.

Biography as a Political Process: Journalism and Reporting

Since 1975 in the United States and elsewhere a new type of biography has appeared that has captured the public's interests. These new writers often come to biography from journalism and investigative reporting. Investigative journalists, perhaps more than academic writers, feel it is their obligation to assess personality, intellect, emotional status, and the moral character of their subjects (Weinberg, pp. 1-2). Although there is a danger of abuse and we do have many examples of recent investigative biography that might be called "muckraking" in their research and approach, quality investigative biography adheres to rigid standards of writing and reporting; and if they violate these standards, they are accountable to their readers and to society as a whole (Weinberg, pp. 19-35).

Biographies written about outstanding investigative reporters themselves make excellent reading in their own right. These biographies help us better understand the society in which these reporters lived and the social and cultural problems that they faced as writers and reporters. For example, nineteenth century reporter Nellie Bly using investigative reporting, exposed the blight of the mentally ill and brutal factory working conditions in late nineteenth-century America. Another reporter and writer from the nineteenth century, Ida M. Tarbel, worked to expose the dishonest and heavy-handed business practices of the Standard Oil Company, leading directly to its restructuring by the United States government. These are good examples of how biography can be used to teach history and the influence of government and commercialism in the lives of all citizens, as well as how persons in all walks of life contribute to national and even international character through their biographies.

Biography in Cinema and Television

We live in a media-driven age. Films and television dominate our cultural and social life. Biography is very much a part of film culture, and for that reason most agree that we must pay close attention to how biographical information is presented through these film media, and how presentations can affect attitudes, behavior, and values.

Biography has been a part of film culture since the beginning of the film industry in the nineteenth century. Between 1927 and 1960, some 300 biographical films were produced (Custen). The 1970s witnessed a watershed of biographical and autobiographical films. Similar to books, filmed biography addresses issues and needs associated with history, national memory, nationalism, and personal identity. Like books, film biography offers a means of expression for groups marginalized by reasons of race, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and class. Filmed biography is also a means whereby nations and regions can assert their claims to special identities. Some critics hold that often film biography can well challenge print and other media in creating powerful biographical images and statements (Everett). For example, the 2006 film *The Queen*, starring Helen Mirren as Queen Elizabeth II attempts to show the conflicts arising within the British Royal Family when royal decorum and tradition clashed with public expectations and political needs concerning the role expected of the Royal Family immediately after the sudden death of Princess Diana.

Television in the 1950s, often called the golden age of television in the United States, produced a number of noteworthy biographical and historical programs. These include Walter Cronkite's *You Are There* (1953-57), *Eyewitness to History* (1961-62), *Twentieth Century* (1957-67), and Edward R. Morrow's *See It Now* (1951-58). Biographical and historical documentaries of the early 60s often challenged American sensitivity with accounts of farm labor exploitations and the emerging gay and lesbian subcultures. Edward R. Morrow's contributions through his *Person to Person* (1953-59) program succeed in solidifying the role and influence of the rich and famous in American popular culture. Aside from these programs, television then as now often blurs the distinction between reality and fiction. Examples of this can be found in the popular celebrity programs of the 1950s, 60s, and 70s based on the fictionalized lives of Desi Arnaz and Lucile Ball, George Burns and Gracy Allen, and Ozzie and Harriet Nelson (Classic TV).

Today's configuration of biographical information found on television outlets in many countries include talk shows, news magazine programs, interview shows, game shows, and reality shows revolving around personal lives. Content can range from the serious to the lighthearted, including topics such as exercise, health information, domestic issues, and romance. Some social observers maintain that the popularity of biographical programs featuring both the famous and the ordinary is based on our human need for intimacy and community, a commodity that is becoming increasingly hard to find and maintain in our modern, urban world.

Television, along with cinema, offers powerful social dialogue and a means of helping youth evaluate and structure their lives. As such, film plays a huge role in shaping a sense of identity for youth. For that reason alone, teacher-librarians, teachers, parents and other caregivers must help youth assess and judge what they see in film and help youth to learn how to monitor their own values apart from what is given to them through these enticing film presentations.

Biography and the Internet

The Internet also has a profusion of biographical information including sites and blogs hosted by little-known individuals. These personal sites and postings often reveal political, religious, and social values and activities, as well as personal information about marriage, and careers. Other sites and blogs highlight public personalities. These sites can honor and celebrate public figures such as politicians or they can denigrate them.

Biographical information is also maintained through official websites such as the American White House, (<http://www.whitehouse.gov>), royal families such as those in Great Britain (<http://www.royal.gov.uk>); Denmark (<http://kongehuset.dk>); and the Netherlands (<http://www.koninklijkhuis.nl/UK/welcome.html>). Various governors and ministers in the United States and elsewhere also maintain official websites. Although these offer official information, they also emphasize the prevailing political and social agendas of the office.

As we know, the Internet is well used by youth. This acceptance again offers teacher-librarians, the opportunity to guide and lead youth to a better understanding of how to evaluate this personal, social, and political information so readily found on the Internet. Likewise, it offers teacher-librarians the opportunity to help youth better understand how to protect themselves from its abuses and misinformation.

Filmed Biography and Visual Literacy: Classroom and Library

The United States government recognized film as an effective means of mass instruction during World War I. The country's armed forces faced the enormous tasks of educating and training large groups of people in such diverse subjects as weaponry, health, and prevention of sexually transmitted diseases (Saettler, pp. 184-94). Educational films for classroom use were introduced prior to World War II; and as early as the 1920s, the first standards for American school libraries recognized the value of film materials for instruction (National Education Association and North Central Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools) .

Films are used in a variety of ways--to enhance cultural and historical awareness. For the general youth population, filmed biographical products have a role to play in improving visual literacy, fostering better logical thinking, and increasing knowledge about history, society, and current affairs. The use of films in both classroom and library offers avenues for teacher-librarian and classroom teacher collaboration. The teacher-librarian must know curriculum and how film might enhance the learning process in the classroom. The teacher-librarian can facilitate the selection of film in collaboration with teachers.

Not only can film provide information, but youth need to be taught to see film as only one of many ways of presenting information. Like all information products, it is driven by human personalities, needs, and social and political agendas. Youth need to know how filmed biographies are conceived, how biographical subjects are interpreted, what sources are used to inform these interpretations, how the film is scripted and dialogue managed, what visual clues are used to advance concepts and information, and how the film is finally edited and focused for the audience. With film, youth must be encouraged to be visually aware and visually skilled as they ponder the legitimacy of filmed biography.

Popular Culture, Biography and the Modern Hero

Popular culture is both a process and a product and it has always influenced how librarians and teachers respond to its demands. Popular culture is a process because it arises from life and continues to change and develop based on the events from ordinary life. The life that sustains and nurtures it may be global, national, regional, or local. Although popular culture is often hard to define, it is generally recognized as being “the behavior patterns of the great mass of people in a given region at the present time.” On the other hand, high culture “is the culture of the elite and usually refers to artistic endeavors such as classical music, dance, theater, certain writings, architecture, etc.” (Harmon).

Popular culture as a process creates and distributes products such as film, television, music, styles and fashions, sports, cyberculture, advertising, toys, and print items (books, novels, comics, magazines). Popular culture is also reflected in issues and attitudes concerning racism, class, gender, sexuality, politics, ethnicity, and political and social processes by which groups are marginalized.

School librarians often find themselves obligated to support both popular and high culture; and this obligation has not come without a struggle. In terms of literature and literacy, traditionally, public youth librarians as well as school teacher-librarians have often favored high culture over popular culture. Public youth librarians have often embraced popular culture in an attempt to attract and keep an elusive and ever-changing audience. Perhaps school librarians have had an easier time following a more restrictive view of popular culture than public youth librarians because they have had to support curriculum mandates designed to encourage the development of higher cultural attainment. Although youth librarians in public libraries have had to meet some of these obligations as well, they must also meet obligations enforced by satisfying popular public demands.

As we know, today's popular culture is celebrity-driven. Most, if not all, world cultures have celebrities. In modern societies today, the public's fascination with celebrities has created a huge industrial and media complex worth billions of dollars. Celebrities rise and fall based on talents and gifts that the public wants and admires; and this fame and fortune often rest with favorable media coverage.

Among others, today's celebrities include movie stars, selected monarchs, talk-show hosts, newsmen, sports figures, politicians, and statesmen and stateswomen. Celebrities also include local personalities.

Sometimes celebrities are held up as heroes; but to do this they must exhibit the characteristics of hero as well as a celebrity. The ability to move from celebrity to hero is often tied to the psychological needs of a society at a given time. For example, John Wayne, the American movie actor was able to move from the role of a minor western actor to a celebrity role as a major film actor to that of a national hero. Apparently he exemplified and became an icon for the perceived values of the culture from which he arose (Willis).

Mass Media, Culture, Celebrities, Heroes and Youth

Culture, celebrities, the mass media, and youth all play a role in defining who we are in the modern world. Because of this complex intertwining, it is difficult to clearly see how one of these affects others and how they affect our view of modern life and how we create and identify with heroes and celebrities. Writer Joshua Gamson believes that the public's responses are varied and contradictory. To him, the attention the public gives to celebrity is much like sport and trivial pursuits and offers a means or outlet for catharsis or criticism (Gamson). Gamson further noted that in the early twentieth century, biographical narrative explained celebrity in terms of merit and presented the public's expectations that their heroes be meritorious. As the influence of public institutions such as churches, schools and families lessened, mass communication grew, and advertising advanced, becoming more psychologically and sociologically sophisticated. Audience became more powerful and demanding, and the biographical narrative moved to one of artificially manufacturing and producing celebrities (Gamson, pp. 1-24). Garry Willis used the images of John Wayne to analyze the politics of celebrity in American society. He found that in the case of Wayne and his films, there was a progression from representing naïve virtue, to acceptance of heavy and even dark responsibility, and finally to accepting individualism with honor (Willis).

Gill Lines notes that sports figures traditionally have been held up as highly regarded examples of social ideals and masculine virtues. Solid values learned on the playing field were thought to transfer easily into life. Lines contends that modern mass media has intruded on these concepts and has created a damaged male sports hero. Mass media can often violate the ideals of the male sports heroes by labeling them as drunkards, illegal drug users, rapists, and wife beaters. On the other hand, mass media have also created unrealistic ideas about sports heroes. Because the public pays attention to sports and the people that play them, the mass media aggressively create images that will attract readers. In doing this, mass media play a decisive role in determining how sports heroes are characterized and models developed. In exerting its power to mold and shape images, the mass media have largely ignored or marginalized female

sports heroes. Lines maintains that these images do not necessarily reflect how young people see their heroes (Lines, pp. 285-303).

Sociologist Alan Edelstein argues that the role of hero in American society and probably elsewhere, has changed over the years. In former times, the status of hero could be placed in three categories. The highest of these was those who came from the military, sports, politics, and entertainment. The second group included those who arose from business, adventure, and crime. The lowest ranking group of heroes was scientists, intellectuals, artists and moralists. Edelstein suggests that now America has no national heroes aside from the “celebrity” hero. In order to have heroes, American society in particular must provide a national social framework in which heroic actions can occur. It must have a consensus of core values to which a hero can ascribe and model; and it must allow its heroes to be human and have flaws and still remain heroes (Edelstein).

Teacher-Librarian Collaboration: Providing Access to Biography

Collaboration is an equal process of sharing. In collaboration with classroom teachers, the teacher-librarian is an equal with the classroom teacher in planning instruction and in implementing it through active teaching and evaluation. Likewise, through collaboration, the classroom teacher is an equal in determining the nature of collection development and services. As stated, collaboration also means that the teacher-librarian can assume the role of a teacher in appropriate ways. This might include developing lessons on how to use information resources emphasizing biography. Collaboration might mean using biography to teach elements of literature such as character development and plot structure as well as how facts from history and current events underpin both character and plot. Young children can see biography as story with characters who behave in logical ways. Young children can be taught that biography is dependent on facts and logic. At any age, youth can be taught to access biography as useful and legitimate resources by understanding how facts are used or misused, and how biography is a powerful key to understanding the workings of nations, local communities and people.

Biography offers the teacher-librarian avenues for creative teaching. These include creative dramatics using biographical subjects and situations; music based on composers or music that has a special connection with biography, such as the Viennese waltzes; read-alouds using biographies of admired persons for history and, current events; and booktalks centering around persons in the news or ordinary people who have done extraordinary things or find themselves in extraordinary situations.

Art is another way to present biography. Not only can biographical art be used to introduce personalities, but art also can be analyzed in terms of how it reflects society and the values found in society. For older youth this might include considerations of how subjects through time have been selected based on such designations as class and positions in society. Youth also can be encouraged to consider how symbols have been used and continue to be used in various time periods to emphasize the stature of persons. This might be the display of trappings of royalty, governmental authority, work and employment, and locality. Not to be overlooked here, is how art has always been used to evoke power and control. Despotism regimes

as well as democratic governments have used art in this manner. The style and subjects may differ, but the purpose is much the same, to evoke authority, trust, and loyalty.

The mass media exert an enormous role in the defining and distribution of mass media products. In a similar way, librarians serving youth also play a role in this distribution process in that they review, order and stock many of these products for their users. For example, magazines, television, and movies have always been popular with youth. As we well know, they are often designed and marketed to reflect youth interests and concerns. In doing this, they help inform and construct a framework for youth about popular values and culture that in turn becomes an important part of their lives. Modern teacher-librarians understand the need for youth to reach out into the world, and they can be encouraged to find themselves through reading biography and observing biographical events. The teacher-librarian is perhaps the one figure in the school who can reach out to all students regardless of assigned classroom or curriculum activities.

Conclusion

Biography as an information resource performs many roles in society. It is a central player in forming a sense of national character and identity. Biography exerts a social control role in that it communicates and defines in exact ways national values, expectations and rationalizations for citizenship and citizen behavior. Through biography, cultural and national values are reinforced.

Political biographies have always played a significant role in society. They help define and reinforce government principles whether they are democratic or totalitarian; and they can, if used in positive ways, promote social dialogue between competing and even conflicting ideologies at work in society. In recent years, biography as an information resource has been used to help redefine the positive roles and places in society of various groups that have been previously marginalized.

The abundance of biographical communication in society and the importance of celebrities in modern popular culture have increased the power of biography to influence attitudes and behaviors of youth. Biography now must be considered one of the major means of influencing behaviors and values among youth. As the twentieth-first century unfolds, we must consider biography as an important information resource, and recognize its power and the pervasive place it holds in society. I encourage you as teacher-librarians and youth workers to foster positive biography as a means that provides a gateway to learning and literacy.

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Biographical notes

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Statement of Originality

This statement certifies that the paper above is based upon original research undertaken by the author and that the paper was conceived and written by the author(s) alone and has not been published elsewhere. All information and ideas from others is referenced.