



***Dear Primo: A Letter to My Cousin* Mini-Unit Plan**

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Meet the Designer:

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Introducing the Mini-Unit:

While I teach third grade, this unit is planned with second grade students in mind. I do believe that it could be easily modified to work for first or third grade.

This book—*Dear Primo*—is a great way to discuss how people can be both different and the same. The author, Duncan Tonatiuh, sums up this idea in the author's note: "I am both Mexican and American (literally; I have two passports), and what I've discovered is that despite the apparent differences between these two countries—the buildings, the food, the day-to-day routines, physical appearances, the politics—at the end of the day we are more similar than different. People are people."

Here the author is pointing out that while we at first may notice the differences between the two boys, we can help children see that despite these differences in environment the boys are very similar. We want to be able to discuss with children: How do we show respect and caring for people who are different from us? How do we learn to love and learn from what is different, and connect on things that are similar?

In order to get the most out of this book it is important to understand and be able to express to your students the difference not just in country, but in type of community, that the boys live in. Carlitos lives in *rural* Mexico, while Charlie lives in *urban* United States.

The following is a video that gives a basic overview of the three different types of communities (rural, suburban, and urban). Your school may have other resources for teaching this, but this will at least be a good source for introduction.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jcEY8l8Ix2E>

It is important that you note these differences before you read the book, and that as you read you point out that the two boys live in different kinds of communities. This will help students understand that not all of Mexico is rural, just like not all of the United States is urban.

Contextualizing the Picture Book:

Title: *Dear Primo: A Letter to My Cousin*

Author: Duncan Tonatiuh

Illustrator: Duncan Tonatiuh

Publisher: Abrams Books for Young Readers

Date of Publication: 2010

Context:

Interestingly, nowhere in the book does it explicitly say which United States City it is supposed to be about, but according to the Library of Congress it is New York City. This book does a great job comparing and contrasting two different places and cultures. One possible issue for students' understanding is that the Mexican boy lives in a rural town, while the American cousin lives in a big city. This may cause students to perceive that all of the United States is a city and all of Mexico is rural. In order to combat this misconception it would be beneficial to show pictures of rural areas in America and cities in Mexico. It is also important to note where your students live. I teach in a city. Therefore, Charlie's experience will be similar to that of my students. If you teach in a rural area, your students may connect more with Carlitos.

Here are some pictures to use in your discussions:

New York City

<http://www.nationsonline.org/gallery/USA/New-York-Times-Square.jpg>

Boston

<http://images.adsttc.com/media/images/55f6/f240/adbc/01e0/0e00/02ca/newsletter/vol2-boston.jpg?1442247227>

Chicago

<http://urbanmatter.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/Navy-Pier-Chicago.jpg>

Mexico City

<http://travelchannel.sndimg.com/content/dam/images/travel/stock/2016/10/10/0/GettyImages-539002142-mexico-city-palacio-de-bellas-artes.jpg.rend.tccom.616.462.jpeg>

<http://travelchannel.sndimg.com/content/dam/images/travel/stock/2016/10/10/0/GettyImages-182518777-mexico-city-skyline.jpg.rend.tccom.1280.960.jpeg>

Rural United States

<http://scopeblog.stanford.edu/wp-content/uploads/2011/08/heartland1.jpg>

https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/e/e6/US_9_north_of_Red_Hook,_NY.jpg

Rural Mexico

<https://www.lucasbrunelle.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/pancho-animals-d.jpg>

Summary of picture book:

Two cousins write letters to each other explaining what life is like where they live. One cousin is from Mexico and the other from the United States. Their correspondence shows their differences, but highlights their similarities.

Genre: fiction

Author/illustrator background information:

The author/illustrator was born and raised in Mexico, but went to high school and college in America. He is a citizen of both countries. He is also the author/illustrator of other books such as *Separate is Never Equal*, *Pancho Rabbit and the Coyote*, and *Diego Rivera*. His website highlights his dual affiliation by being both in English and Spanish. It can be found here:

<http://duncantonatiuh.com/>

Sources of inspirations for the author/illustrator:

According to the book jacket's "About the Author" section, as an illustrator "inspired by the ancient art of the Mixtecs and other cultures of Mexico, Tonatiuh incorporates their stylized forms into his artwork." He also uses his experiences of living both in Mexico and America to inform his decisions about the two places in the book.

Geographical region(s)/time period(s) represented in story:

Present, rural Mexico, city (possibly New York City) in United States.

Cultural theme(s) represented in story:

Despite cultural differences we all have a lot in common.

Media of illustrations:

The illustrations are hand drawn and colored, then collaged digitally.

Critical Analysis:

Use visual thinking strategies and critical multicultural practices.

Before reading, you'll want to show students the cover. Ask them what they notice about the cover. You will want to discuss how the cover illustration sets up the comparison of the two boys. Ask your students what they notice about each boy. You'll also want to ask if anyone knows what *primo* means. When first looking at the title, anyone who doesn't know that *primo* means cousin in Spanish may think that Primo is a person's name. How does knowing what *primo* means change what we know about the cover illustration?

In the front matter we only see the Mexican cousin, Carlitos. You may want to ask your students why they think that is. I think it's because Carlitos is the "unknown" to the average student in the United States. This is the boy that they are going to be learning more about. Is that really true? If you have students from Mexico that might not be true at all. If you teach in a rural setting your students may connect much more with Carlitos. The idea that student readers will relate more to Charlie is also shown in the first page—the only page not told in letter form, where Charlie is setting up the story.

Before reading you may want to go around and have students share where their families are from, and ask what they know about their countries of origin. Explain that this story is about a boy who is from Mexico, but does not know much about that country. He is writing back and forth with his cousin who lives there so they can both learn about each other's homes.

Ask: If you were going to write to someone from another country, what questions would you ask them? What are you curious about? Let's see if these cousins had the same questions.

Because the text is fairly short and simple, the comparisons are a bit superficial. The boys don't go into details about life in their own countries, and really just skim over the basics. For example, *futbol* and basketball, quesadillas and pizza, concerts and parades, etc... On the one hand this is a great introduction for kids because these are simple things they will be able to relate to. On the other hand, each country has much more complexity and qualities that are missed when we only look at very simple aspects. Another positive, however, is that many of these examples can be seen in either country. For instance, you can eat quesadillas in the United States. You can go to a store in Mexico. It really depends more on the community that you are visiting.

Learning Experiences:

Learning Experience Design #1:

Use context clues to figure out unknown words.

Depending on your students, the Spanish words may be mostly familiar or mostly unknown. They are not translated in the text; rather there are pictures to help the reader determine their meaning and a glossary to check for accuracy. As we read, we will stop at the Spanish words and use the context to determine the meaning. We will then check for accuracy in the glossary. We will also keep track of the Spanish words we learn.

Depending on the make-up of the class, this activity can look very different. For a class where no one speaks Spanish, this is a great learning experience and practice with how context clues can help us even when the words are in a different language. For classes where students are familiar with Spanish but not fluent, this is a great opportunity for students to learn more. I know that many of my students' parents speak Spanish as their first language, but the students themselves were born in the United States and do not speak Spanish fluently. Many of them use certain words or phrases in Spanish, but out of their familiar context aren't able to use the language. This is a great way for students to connect to something that is thought of as "only for home" in a classroom setting. Thirdly, if there are students who are fluent in Spanish, this is a great opportunity to highlight their skill and allow them to teach the class what they know.

For independent work, students will choose or be given one of the Spanish words. They will need to create a collage to define the word. The easiest materials to use for this activity would be magazines. This could also be an opportunity to discuss what students notice about how gender and race are portrayed in magazines. You should decide if this will be an appropriate discussion for your students. You do want to make sure you are not giving them materials that are problematic in their portrayal of race and gender, so look carefully at the sources before you give them out.

Multimodal Families and Communities Connections:

At home, students will discuss with their families where they come from, and what languages their family speaks (even a little bit!). With their families, students will choose a word in that language to make a collage about (like the one we did in school).

A letter should go home to the families explaining this project and the context behind it. Also, if you have students whose families really don't have any other language that they speak, encourage them to pick an English word that is meaningful to them. Make sure students and families understand it's not about being fluent in a second language. For example, I would probably choose a word in Hebrew or Yiddish because my family is Jewish. We don't speak either fluently at home, but those languages are important to our cultural identity.

Additional Multimodal Opportunities:

This may be a great opportunity to read other books that are in English, but include words in Spanish. This re-telling of Little Red Riding Hood tells the familiar story, but using Spanish words. You can use it in a similar way to *Dear Primo*.

<http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/16667896-little-roja-riding-hood>

Learning Experience Design #2:

Today's lesson will focus on comparing and contrasting, and distinguishing point of view. Discuss how, because the book is written in letters, the point of view changes with each page. The students will also work to compare and contrast the two boys' lives. As a class we will reread the text, filling in a Venn diagram as we read. The left side will be about Charlie (cousin from USA), the right side will be about Carlitos (cousin from Mexico), and the middle section will be about both of them. One example of details that could be put in these three sections is: on the left side, "Charlie rides the train to school," on the right side, "Carlitos rides his bike to school," and in the middle, "They both go to school."

While doing this activity it will be important to clarify some cultural points:

- ✱ This is a good place to discuss the differences between rural and urban — as well as showing that both settings exist in both countries (if you already did this as an introduction, review it here so that they remember to consider it in their comparisons).
- ✱ On the page about what they eat, it may seem like in Mexico they ONLY eat quesadillas, while "in America we have lots of different foods." The teacher should point out that there are many different kinds of foods in Mexico as well, but the cousin from Mexico chose to only share about his favorite meal.
- ✱ Point out that many of the things the cousins are telling each other about are special and do not happen every day. For example, Thanksgiving and Halloween are only once a year in the

United States, so the cultural holidays described in Mexico are also not occasions that happen every day.

For independent work students will do some writing. Here are a few ideas:

1. Write an essay comparing and contrasting the two cousins.
2. Write a continuation of the book as Charlie.
3. Write a continuation of the book from Carlitos.

You could also have half the class do #2 and the other half do #3, then have students pair up to respond to each other.

4. Have students write two corresponding letters between a child in the United States and a child from another country (could be a country they are researching, or one they or their family are from).

Multimodal Families and Communities Connections:

For homework, students will have a list of questions to answer about their own lives, and then will need to ask an adult at home to answer those same questions about their own childhood. In the next day's class, students will be responsible for sharing some similarities and differences that they discovered.

You may want to have students write out the list together (this could also come from your introduction of the book where students came up with questions they might ask a cousin from another country).

Additional Multimodal Opportunities:

You may not have time to watch all of these, but the following are a few videos of kids from the United States trying popular foods from other countries. It's interesting seeing what they like and don't like, and how they compare unfamiliar foods to foods that they know.

Breakfast

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JGjeaHe7GkY>

Lunch

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qsyhztzKlXkw>

Dinner

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JmOGqOG8SbI>

Creating Multimodal Interdisciplinary Opportunities:

In order to avoid just focusing on food, you may want to have students do research about other countries. As a class you could come up with a short list of questions everyone will have to answer. Then come up with a way of assigning countries. Either kids pick them randomly, or they get to choose which country they want. Then the students will have to present their research—this could be in an essay, video, PowerPoint, poster, or any other method that your students have access to.

Learning Experience Design #3:

Today we will focus on writing letters like the ones in the book. Together we will make a list of topics covered in the book (how they get to school, what sports they play, foods they eat, etc...). Students will then write a letter to a pen pal, using these same topics to discuss details about their own life, and ask their pen pal to reply in turn with their own experiences.

The pen pals could be arranged any way the teacher chooses and is logistically able to do. The pen pals could be with a different class in your school, a different class of the same grade in another school in your district, or could be with a class anywhere you can make a connection. For instance, even though I teach in Massachusetts, I am from Pennsylvania and have many teacher friends there. I would most likely set up a pen pal arrangement with a friend of mine who teaches in Pennsylvania.

This piece of the unit can also be as long or short as the teacher chooses. It could be done just once, or could continue over the course of the school year. If you continue the correspondence all year, it might be nice to have a summative experience like a class-to-class video chat. If it's possible you may even have an event where the two classes meet up in person.

Multimodal Families and Communities Connections:

If you are going to have families come in for the summative learning experience listed below, you could have students create invitations for their parents.

Additional Multimodal Opportunities:

Another book you may want to read in preparation for starting pen pals is *A Pen Pal for Max*, written by Gloria Rand and illustrated by Tend Rand. The story is about a boy from Chile who works in a vineyard. He writes a pen pal letter and sticks it in a box of grapes heading to the United States. The story follows the correspondence that ensues.

The following video gives a little taste of what two classes experienced when they became pen pals. One class was from California, the other from Tanzania:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t31ESdcFwE0>

Summative Multimodal Learning Experience:

This activity/event would build on Learning Experience 2. Invite parents to come in. As a group we will read the book together, and discuss the central message that despite many differences, people are people and we have a lot in common. Students will then sit with their families to create a presentation comparing and contrasting details about the student's childhood with their parents' (or other adult family member's) childhood. The piece they create could be a drawing, letters, a PowerPoint, a video, or any other representation that you have access to.

Satisfying the Standards:

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.2.6

Acknowledge differences in the points of view of characters, including by speaking in a different voice for each character when reading dialogue aloud.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.2.7

Use information gained from the illustrations and words in a print or digital text to demonstrate understanding of its characters, setting, or plot.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.2.9

Compare and contrast two or more versions of the same story (e.g., Cinderella stories) by different authors or from different cultures.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.1.9

Compare and contrast the adventures and experiences of characters in stories.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.2.4

Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases based on grade 2 reading and content, choosing flexibly from an array of strategies.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.2.4.a

Use sentence-level context as a clue to the meaning of a word or phrase.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.2.4.e

Use glossaries and beginning dictionaries, both print and digital, to determine or clarify the meaning of words and phrases.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.2.8

Recall information from experiences or gather information from provided sources to answer a question.

Next Steps for Your Learning:

You may choose to do some of the extra multimodal experiences after you have completed your work with *Dear Primo*.

You may also want to explore more about Mexico, letter writing, or similarities and differences between people.