

# Tales from the Chihuahuan Desert: Borderlands Narratives about Identity and Binationalism

National Endowment for the Humanities and The University of Texas at El Paso  
2017 Summer Institute for Secondary School Teachers (Grades 6<sup>th</sup>–12<sup>th</sup>)  
An Instructional Unit with Multiple Lesson Plans

## “The Journal as Border: bridging vision and voice”

A collaborative educational adventure by Gordon Hultberg and Linda Okoth [use IMAGE 1\_thumbnail\_mural] photo: detail of *El Paso Gracias a Dios* by Hal Marcus, 1993

**Gordon Hultberg** is a veteran teacher of English, drama, and the humanities with an interest in the arts and letters, Christianity, and democratic learning. A California native, he teaches in Salt Lake City, which has significant immigrant and refugee populations. Gordon joined the Summer Institute to open conversations about adolescent literacies, languages, and learning. He hopes to use new strategies among binational students in Utah and California with web-based instruction and also to find community among critical educators. Gordon enjoys biking, parakeets, and jazz piano as well as reading and teaching Charles Dickens and James Lee Burke. He is an independent scholar at the Dickens Universe at the University of California, Santa Cruz in August 2017. Gordon can be reached at [ghgordon049@gmail.com](mailto:ghgordon049@gmail.com) and [@pradlfan](https://www.instagram.com/pradlfan).

**Linda Okoth** lives in Herndon, Virginia. She teaches digital and studio art to Upper Schoolers at a JK – 12 independent school. Adobe Illustrator is Linda’s favorite computer program; fiber art and ink painting are her favorite studio disciplines. Being a Community Service Coordinator is another meaningful way she engages with students, faculty, staff, and community members. An expectant gardener, Linda appreciates the beauty and happy memories that a garden brings. She is honored to have been a part of the Borderlands Summer Institute and excited about how this experience will continue to shape her teaching and artistic process. Linda can be reached at [lokoth@flinthill.org](mailto:lokoth@flinthill.org).

**Subject Area:** Poetry/English Language Arts and Studio Art

**Keywords:** *poetry, sensory, food, illustration, observation, media, Southwest, Pat Mora, imagery, communication, journal, identity*

### Introduction

This unit is particularly appropriate to 9th and 10th grades and may be modified for 11th and 12th. Most aspects of the lesson are foundational in nature. This unit comprises a total of ten to twelve 50-minute integrated lessons.

### Standards:

**VISUAL ART:** [www.NationalCoreArtStandards.com](http://www.NationalCoreArtStandards.com)

**Creating: Conceiving and developing new artistic ideas and work.**

Anchor Standard #1. Generate and conceptualize artistic ideas and work.

Anchor Standard #2. Organize and develop artistic ideas and work.

Anchor Standard #3. Refine and complete artistic work.

**Responding: Understanding and evaluating how the arts convey meaning.**

Anchor Standard #7. Perceive and analyze artistic work.

Anchor Standard #8. Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work.

Anchor Standard #9. Apply criteria to evaluate artistic work

**Connecting: Relating artistic ideas and work with personal meaning and external context.**

Anchor Standard #10. Synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experiences to make art.

Anchor Standard #11. Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural and historical context to deepen understanding.

**Students should:**

Develop an awareness of the narrative qualities of illustrative drawing and its relationship to poetry.

Examine sensory awareness as a vehicle of creative self-expression.

Demonstrate the distinct steps of observational drawing: observation, gesture, and contour.

Use introductory elements and principles of design and begin to understand their role in aesthetics.

Understand factors that shape identity.

**LANGUAGE ARTS**

**Writing: Research to Build and Present Knowledge**

CCSS #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.

**Reading Literature: Integration of Knowledge and Ideas**

CCSS #7. Analyze the representation of a subject or a key scene in two different artistic mediums, including what is emphasized or absent in each treatment (e.g., Auden's "Musée des Beaux Arts" and Breughel's Landscape with the Fall of Icarus).

**Language - Knowledge of Language**

CCSS #3. Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts, to make effective choices for meaning or style, and to comprehend more fully when reading or listening.

**Students should:**

Develop an awareness of the effects of imagery and music in poetry - its vision and voice.

Demonstrate the steps in the recursive writing process.

Identify and apply figurative language, line length, rhythm, and rhyme in the aesthetic design of poems.

**5. Guiding Questions:**

- What is illustration; what is poetry? What are their roles in creating narrative art?
- How do verbal and visual images guide communication and self-narrative?
- How can poetry and drawing be used to illustrate sensory experiences, particularly in storytelling related to identity?

- In what ways can personal awareness of one's environment guide the relationship between creativity and identity?

## 6. Required Materials:

Students should have a 9" x 12" multi-media sketchbook for journaling their poetry and drawings; variety of media (crayons, chalk pastels, oil pastels, and colored pencils), including magazines for creating collage; rub-on glue sticks; and, scissors. Pizza! And other food for still lifes. Local plants or fragrant herbs selected for texture and fragrance. Reading sources as noted. [insert IMAGE 2\_supplies] photo: supplies

## 7. Introduction

This unit takes inspiration from Pat Mora's remark about loving "the open space of a page". Its focus is to invite students to Celebrate the Empty Page through an art and poetry journal.

It is designed with the hope that you enjoy bridging the divide between vision and voice, both for yourself and as a mentor to your students. Gordon and Linda have enjoyed discussing, discovering, and delineating the commonality of creative process and executive function in the narrative art forms of illustration and poetry. Of course, many inspirations for this collaboration have come from our Borderlands study at UTEP through the NEH Summer Scholars program. Reading and hearing the profound work of Mexican American poet, Pat Mora--from the artist herself--has been particularly inspiring and profound. While our journal unit is largely inspired by her work, we encourage you to read "Dear Teacher" as a gift to yourself before embracing this educational plan.

[insert *DEAR TEACHER* by Pat Mora here]

In looking at the perspectives offered by the people, places, and things of the Chihuahuan Desert, we have come to appreciate the context of dual identities, as well as hidden identities. Understanding borders in our thought processes, we see the metaphor of "bridge" as a means of uniting and celebrating our rich, holistic humanities traditions. We invite you to our borderland, no passport required.

## 8. Instructional and Lesson Activities (ENGAGE, EXPLORE, EXPLAIN)

Introduce keeping a journal for observational experiences, which are expressed both visually and verbally. Spend time creating a decorative collage for the front cover, letting students select and print images meaningful to them, as well as inviting them to select from available magazine cut outs, and/or their own drawn images. Own that journal! (50 minutes) [insert IMAGES 3 and 4\_journal] photos: Journal evolution

Read the poem "Ode to Pizza." Let the students unravel the delicate language that describes sensory imagery, as well as the role of food in culture. Record notes about the poem in journals. (50 minutes)

Write an imitation of Pat Mora's poem using the scaffolding of an imagery lesson, mentor text, and mini-lesson on musicality and revision. Frequent pair-sharing with shoulder partners; conclude each day with "author's chair." (two 50-minute periods)

Create an illustration in the journal of a slice of pizza either from observation or imagination. Provide a variety of media to encourage choice and confidence. Encourage students to think about how their illustration reflects the sensory language of the poem. (50 minutes) [insert IMAGES 5, 6, and 7] photos: illustration drawings of pizza develop from imagination

Examine attributes of the artist in sensory experiences through the book *I am an Artist*. Allow students time to reflect in their journals about the verbal and visual imagery and to record their observations. What does it mean to "...look at a bird until I feel feathery, too?" Has their awareness of sensory experiences altered their identity of "artist?" Create an illustration of a "I am an Artist when I..." (50 minutes) [insert IMAGE 8\_illustration by Ellie Rose] photo: collage illustration by Ellie Rose

Read "Sonrisas" by Pat Mora. Invite students to listen to and talk about the sounds of the poem. Brainstorm the delightful or offensive sounds people and food sometimes make as meals are prepared, plated, served, and eaten. Be sure to include the clattering dishware, laughter from other tables, media buzzing in another room. Write a new/second poem to let the sounds of eating and drinking spill onto your empty page. Share in small groups and finish with "author's chair." (50 minutes; can be repeated)

Extend the learning outside of school by adding observations, sketches, photographs, sounds, sights, smells, and textures to your journal. Clip images you find and glue them into your journal. Write down snippets of conversation overheard, and the feeling of a rushed morning. Celebrate your life on the empty page! [insert IMAGE 9\_journal entry by Adrian] photo: journal entry of NYC visit by Adrian/photo by Adrian

Develop a second drawing in the journal based on sensory experience and true observation. Here is an outline of the steps often used in crafting observational drawings, also known as drawing from life. *Drawing from The Right Side of The Brain* can be a wonderful resource for learning more about this method. (50 minutes -- two 50 minute periods; can be repeated with the same or other objects)

- *Step One:* Choose and observe a food item to draw. Ideally pick something with varied edges, such as a slice of cabbage, rather than an unpeeled orange. Look at it for at least one minute, as you observe the shape and edges. [insert IMAGE 10\_choosing a banana] photo: choosing and observing an item
- *Step Two:* Look at a blank page in your journal. Imagine where you will place this object on the page.
- *Step Three:* Roughly and lightly sketch in the overall shape of the item. Just think of the shape! This type of fluid line is known as GESTURE. This step should take about 30 - 60 seconds. [insert IMAGES 11 and 12\_banana gestures] photos: gesture drawings
- *Step Four:* Begin to outline your object. Only think of the edge; record the edge as a line without lifting your pencil. Work slowly, letting your eye remain on what you are

seeing, as your hand records it. This type of line is known as CONTOUR. [insert IMAGES 13 and 14\_banana contour] photos: contour drawing

- Step Five: Begin to record the inner lines--think of those as edges, too--*borders*, if you will. [insert IMAGES 15 and 16\_banana filled in with lines, shapes, and color] photos: inner contour lines and color
  
- Optional further steps:
  - ❖ Begin looking for where there is light and dark. This is known as VALUE in art. Describe how the effect of the drawing changed when light and dark was included. Is there an illusion at work? [insert IMAGE 17\_Sofia's seashell] photo: value study of seashell by Sofia
  - ❖ Think about adding color! Think about adding an interesting color to just the outlines. Try working with representative color; try working with non-representative color. [insert IMAGE 18\_bird relief] photo: colored relief illustration of bird by Lauren
  - ❖ Make a series of pictures that includes a time lapse. [insert IMAGE 19\_Harrison's banana series] photo: time lapse value study by Harrison
  - ❖ Think about how you work. Did it work best to work foreground to background or background to foreground? Did it help to focus on big sections first or the details? Could you work light colors then dark colors as easily as dark to light?

Journal a list of unifying factors in bridging voice and vision in the creative process. Discuss and record your observations; as a guide, we have provided ours below. (50 minutes)

1. Love "the open space of a page" [insert IMAGE 20\_blank page] photo: blank page
2. Brainstorm
3. Observe/sense [insert IMAGE 21\_what to draw] photo: observing the mountain
4. Format/frame [insert IMAGE 22\_framing] photo: framing
5. Map out a rough outline/sketch [insert IMAGE 23\_gesture] [ insert Gordon's video] photo: gesture
6. Include details [insert IMAGES 24 and 25\_contour and color] photo: adding inner contour and color
7. Develop a foundational awareness of design elements and their role in aesthetic beauty
8. Reflect and refine through critique and conference
9. Explore independent creativity through voice and vision [insert IMAGE 26\_Anapra] photo: pastel drawing with poem, *Anapra*

Revise a poem by selecting one of your poetry starts to bring to a writing conference with the teacher. (Teachers use their personal protocols for conference. I ask students to fill out a conference sheet with a title, telling what is working and what needs work in their piece. They read the piece aloud, and offer any background drawings or experiences connected with the piece. They are in control of the conference. The teacher asks a question to get them to talk about the poem or process so student solves the problem and decides on the "next step".) All students are working on writing or art or on a combination in their journals. (5-minute conferences multiplied by number of students total)

Write a Reflection on your process so far, in a dated journal entry. Mention your writing and your art process. Consider how they are similar or different for you. Identify ways that your

work reflects you, such as the inclusion of favorite words, foods, places or colors. Finish your reflection by creating a symbol on the page (it could be your signature) that stands for how you see yourself today as a writer and artist. (50 minutes, includes teacher modeling)

## **9. Extend/Elaborate: Additional Learning**

### **Inspiring tangents that teachers and students could explore the creative process:**

- Further explore the role of design vocabulary in developing and analyzing verbal and visual arts. [IMAGE 27\_design chart] image: Crystal Productions *Elements and Principles of Design*
- Make food with students/host a potluck to further sensory exploration and creative process.
- Study other forms of creative expression, such as create music or dance related to poetry.
- Go on a field trip for outside learning, such as to a restaurant, writing center, or museum.
- Investigate other poets and illustrators who use sensory stimuli for inspiration, such as Mary Oliver and Norman Rockwell.
- Develop a poetry slam for sharing poetry with other members of the school community, with accompanying art show.
- Interview a family member to further investigate identity; create a poem and portrait about their life
- Look at the relationship of visual and verbal art forms in other cultures, such as in the Chinese language that incorporates pictograms. [insert IMAGE 28\_collage and painting by Avishka] photo: collage and painting of Chinese character for Enlightenment by Avishka]
- Investigate other forms of writing and art, such as haiku, an art app on the ipad [insert IMAGE 29\_gesture drawing], or sculpture [insert IMAGE 30 and 31\_Tucker's pizza sculpture and Alex's ceramic food sculpture]. photos: Gesture drawing on the ipad of Genevieve, and, felted pizza sculpture by Tucker and ceramic food sculpture by Alex.

## **10. Evaluate: Assessment**

Writing conferences and in-process drawing critiques offer formative assessment and feedback; workshop model is the main vehicle for ongoing assessment of each student's work. Assess to determine if each learner is using both written and visual portions of journal, completes the reflection, and is taking ownership of the journal.

## **11. Accommodations**

1. Provide individualized methods of presentation and develop supplemental material as needed.
2. Provide outline of project tasks to provide project pacing.
3. Provide additional practice to ensure mastery, with accommodations for additional time needed without assessment penalty.
4. Substitute a similar, less complex, task for a particular assignment.

5. Develop simple study guides to complement required materials.
6. Create a word wall that is accompanied by an image or photograph for each new vocabulary term.
7. Allow students optimal seating arrangement, i.e., closer to projection screen.
8. Instructions can be supplied in other languages at start of each period.

## 12. College and Career Readiness

Write and edit work so that it conforms to the guidelines in a style manual (e.g., MLA Handbook, Turabian's Manual for Writers) appropriate for the discipline and writing type.

## 13. Additional Resources

Edwards, Betty. *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain*. London: Souvenir, 2014. Print.  
<http://blogs.ncte.org/index.php/2016/04/remember-pronounce-vital-finding-making-poems/>

[http://www.americanartarchives.com/what\\_is\\_illustration.htm](http://www.americanartarchives.com/what_is_illustration.htm)

<http://blogs.ncte.org/index.php/2016/04/remember-pronounce-vital-finding-making-poems/>

Mora, Pat. *Zing!: Seven Creativity Practices for Educators*. Corwin. 2010.

## 14. Required resources:

Collins, Pat Lowery, and Robin Brickman. *I Am an Artist*. Minneapolis, MN: First Avenue Editions, an Imprint of Lerner Group, 2015. Print.

Mora, Pat. "Dear Teacher." *English Journal*, vol. 94, no. 3, 2005, pp. 32-35.

Mora, Pat. *My Own True Name: New and Selected Poems for Young Adults, 1984–1999*. Piñata Books–Arte Público Press, 2000.

## 15. Reflection

**Gordon:** I am inspired when I collaborate with a teacher from a different discipline, because I grow when I work with others. I stretched in this assignment to combine an artist's process and a writer's process. Yet the two of us approach teaching and learning in much the same way. I have seldom seen students as engaged as when they are composing poems or an artwork. I look forward to seeing actual results of student art/poetry journals from our own classes and those around the globe. This process forced us to distill and crystallize a few crucial elements from our border experience and use them to construct a driving metaphor.

**Linda:** Embracing facets of nuanced experience has been the essence of the Borderlands study, as well as my collaboration with Gordon. As the proverb states: "If you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go together." I am grateful for the opportunity that Gordon and I

had to “go together” in seeing unifying experiences of our creative lives and those of our students.

Reflecting about this experience, I am deeply conscious of the narratives of the Borderlands, as told by the people, artifacts, plants, architecture, and geology of the Chihuahuan Desert. These stories include great beauty and joy, as well as significant tragedy. Over the next few months--and years--I will continue to sensitively investigate appropriate avenues for discussion and engagement regarding Borderlands realities. The complexity and contradiction of this place belongs to our human story.

[insert IMAGES 29 and 30\_mural and information plaque] photos: Linda and Gordon in front of mural, *El Paso Gracias a Dios* by Hal Marcus, 1993, photo by Christa

video by Gordon; all photographs and artwork by Linda, except otherwise indicated