**Jay Thompson: Creative Writing Learning Plan**

**Title:** Hunger and Thirst

**Schedule:** 2.5 hours (one/two sessions)

**Category:** Cultural and integrated arts

**Grades:** 6-12

**Number of Participants:** 5-20

**Big Idea:** Sharing and listening to each other’s writing shows us how deeply culture and inequality affect our daily lives.

**Student Learning Assessment:**

*Objective #1:* Students observe the depth of feelings and variety of memories that food can trigger. *Criteria:* Students share the cultural and emotional ties that food has in the work they heard, whether it was a painful reminder of scarcity or a chance for warmth and companionship, an exploration of other cultures or a connection to one’s own.

*Objective #2:* Students draw on memory and imagination to return to an emotionally-affecting experience of a familiar thing. *Criteria:* Students use details to write a description of the memories associated with a familiar thing (food, activity, item, or place) about which they have strong feelings.

*Objective #3:* Students reflect on changed perspective writing gave them in understanding their experience of a familiar thing. *Criteria:* Students identify the sources of their intense feelings in their surroundings and in their larger environment.

**Vocabulary:** *Speaker:* The “I” in a poem (not always the author).

**Relevant State Standards:**

ELA / Writing Standards Gr. 6-12, Text Type & Purpose 3: “Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.”

ELA / Reading Standards Gr. 6-12, Key Ideas & Details 2: “Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.”

**Instructions:**

Room setup. Chairs ideally arranged in an open circle with room for me and whiteboard at front. All students have paper and pencils.

I welcome students, and frame the session/s in terms of the big idea: that sharing and listening to each other’s writing shows us how deeply culture and inequality affect our daily lives.

**Writing Prompt 1**

As a warmup, I ask the students to:

*Describe a food that makes you think of your family. Describe one strong memory that comes to mind when you imagine the food; use all five senses.*

I give the students five minutes to write. Then I invite students to share their work aloud. I encourage students to listen for how the writer used the five senses, and which memory the writer focused on. After all willing participants share, we discuss:

What feelings come up for you with the food you wrote about? Pleasure, nostalgia, shame, distaste?

Who heard someone else write about the same food they described? Did they respond similarly to the food, or differently?

**Formative Assessment Checkpoint for Objective #1:**

*Objective:* Students observe the depth of feelings and variety of memories that food can trigger.

*Criteria:* Students share the cultural and emotional ties that food has in the work they heard, whether it was a painful reminder of scarcity or a chance for warmth and companionship, an exploration of other cultures or a connection to one’s own.

*Method/Tool:* Verbal feedback with additional comments on note sheet.

I hand out copies of Natalie Diaz’s poem “Why I Hate Raisins,” from her collection *When My Brother Was an Aztec* (2012 Copper Canyon Press). One student reads it aloud.

**Why I Hate Raisins**

by Natalie Diaz

*And is it only the mouth and belly which are*

*injured by hunger and thirst?*

*—Mencius*

Love is a pound of sticky raisins

packed tight in black and white

government boxes the day we had no

groceries. I told my mom I was hungry.

She gave me the whole bright box.

USDA stamped like a fist on the side.

I ate them all in ten minutes. Ate

too many too fast. It wasn’t long

before those old grapes set like black

clay at the bottom of my belly

making it ache and swell.

I complained, *I hate raisins.*

*I just wanted a sandwich like other kids.*

*Well that’s all we’ve got,* my mom sighed.

*And what other kids?*

*Everyone but me,* I told her.

She said, *You mean the white kids.*

*You want to be a white kid?*

*Well too bad ’cause you’re my kid.*

I cried, *At least the white kids get a sandwich.*

*At least the white kids don’t get the shits.*

That’s when she slapped me. Left me

holding my mouth and stomach—

devoured by shame.

I still hate raisins,

but not for the crooked commodity lines

we stood in to get them—winding

around and in the tribal gymnasium.

Not for the awkward cardboard boxes

we carried them home in. Not for the shits

or how they distended my belly.

I hate raisins because now I know

my mom was hungry that day, too,

and I ate all the raisins.

We discuss the poem after reading. Questions for discussion:

* What’s going on in this poem? What makes you say so?
* How did the speaker feel as a child, about her mother and about having raisins for dinner? How does she feel about the experience now as an adult?
* How do the mother’s feelings change over the poem?
* What is “injured” by hunger in the poem, and when is that injury felt? (Why does the speaker now hate raisins?)

Introduce students to the USDA’s [Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations](https://www.fns.usda.gov/fdpir/food-distribution-program-indian-reservations-fdpir) (FDPIR) described in the poem, distributing a handout downloaded from FDPIR’s website.

Compare the [program’s stated goals](http://www.sctca.net/sites/default/files/Native_Commod_Cookbook.pdf) to its actual consequences of [cultural erasure](http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2013/10/24/eating-indigenouslychangesdietsandlivesofnativeamericans.html).

Share statistics on [the widespread scarcity and poverty](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/10/opinion/kristof-povertys-poster-child.html) on particularly the upper Plains reservations where the program is most widely implemented.

Questions for discussion:

* What does FDPIR attempt to do? What are its actual effects?
* How is FDPIR, or a program like it, a part of the life of the speaker’s family in “Why I Hate Raisins”?
* What feelings do the characters in the poem have about these programs?

[If conducted over two sessions, break point here]

**Writing Prompt 2**

I ask the students to close their eyes and think of ordinary things that are a part of their life: foods, household items, family activities, familiar places.

Then, as a pre-writing exercise, I ask them to divide a new sheet of paper into two columns. On the left column, have them list three foods they love; on the right, list three foods they hate. Repeat this activity for household items, family activities, and familiar places.

Then I ask the students to circle the one (in either column) that feels most vivid and think of a memory associated with this thing. Over seven minutes, I’ll write a series of questions on the board and ask them to answer with a short sentence:

*Where are you?*

*Inside or outside?*

*What are you looking at?*

*What are you doing?*

*What time of day or night does it seem to be?*

*What season?*

*Who else is there? What sort of mood do they seem to be in?*

*Who just left or may be coming?*

*Why are you there?*

*About how old are you?*

*What’s in front of you? What’s behind you? To the left, to the right, above your head, below your feet?*

Students write the title on a new page, “Why I Hate \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_” or “Why I Love \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.” Then, using the details they provided, they’ll describe their memory the thing they chose, for ten minutes.

I invite students to share their writing. I remind students to listen, in the reader’s work, for specific details of the scene; call on at least two listeners to share a memorable detail after each reader.

**Formative Assessment Checkpoint for Objective #2:**

*Objective:* Students draw on memory and imagination to return to an emotionally-affecting experience of a familiar thing.

*Criteria:* Students use details to write a description of the memories associated with a familiar thing (food, activity, item, or place) about which they have strong feelings.

*Method/Tool:* Verbal feedback with additional comments on note sheet.

**Writing Prompt 3**

I ask students to return to the writing they just did and reflect on two questions for three minutes each:

*By doing this writing, do they have a new awareness about why they love, or hate, the thing they describe?*

*Can they think of any institutions, rules, communities, or other forces that affected this experience they had, as the FDPIR affected Diaz’s experience?*

I open a discussion where students can draw from what they wrote in conversation. I return to the big idea: that sharing and listening to each other’s writing shows us how deeply culture and inequality affect our daily lives. What bigger forces did we see at work in these personal stories, whether family roles, race and racism, heritage exemplified in food, or other examples?

I ask the students to share how well they feel they did at engaging this big idea, both in their own writing and in their listening to one another.

**Formative Assessment Checkpoint for Objective #3:**

*Objective:* Students reflect on changed perspective writing gave them in understanding their experience of a familiar thing.

*Criteria:* Students identify the sources of their intense feelings in their surroundings and in their larger environment.

*Method/Tool:* Verbal feedback with additional comments on note sheet.

I end the group by thanking the students for their honesty, courage, and energy in writing.