

# Characterization in **The Ponder Heart**: A Collaborative Speaking Unit

By Gail Lindenberg

## Overview

Most appropriate with secondary students grades 7-12, this unit would work well in conjunction with study of Eudora Welty's **The Ponder Heart**. The literary link is helpful, but the unit can also stand alone. Through the voice of her madcap narrator, Welty introduces the reader to the vagaries and eccentricities of the Ponder family. Students will explore unique aspects of their own family and culture as a spark to telling tales of personal interest. Participation in small group discussions will prepare students and allow collaborative coaching towards a public speaking or writing activity. Students will craft narrative anecdotes from their family/cultural history. This unit works best at the beginning of the school year as a means of establishing a strong learning community, sharing culturally diversity and mutual awareness.

## Objectives

Students will:

- Assess fellow students' oral narrative tales
- Discuss the attributes that marked the "best" narratives
- Compose of their own narrative tales
- Interview family members
- Make a final speaking presentation to the entire class

## Skills Attained

- Narrative writing based on personal experience
- Oral expression of narrative tales to a small group, and then to the whole class
- Giving and sharing feedback as a listener to other group members
- Utilization of "sandwich criticism" within small groups
- Employing suggestions from others as a means of improving a final narrative tale

## Lesson Outline

In 1985, **Fortune** magazine surveyed top business executives about their greatest fear. One would expect the results to include a fear of inevitable death or, perhaps, a fear of an IRS audit. The results were surprising. The single most often mentioned fear was of public speaking. If students fear getting up in front of the class and speaking, they are not alone.

### I. Anticipatory Set

Begin the lesson by discussing stage fright. Discuss the butterflies in the stomach. Mention that actors get jitters, but learn to use the adrenaline of their fright to energize and intensify performance. Students who are athletes will know that one does not sit idle getting more nervous before a competition. Physical movement will "warm up" the body and keep the blood flowing. Before a speech (or examination), the student must keep moving. Stiff, frozen muscles increase the possibility of freezing up and performing poorly. Suggest that students support their mental preparation with physical motion that can be accomplished in their seats while they wait their turn. Another good hint for the truly terrified is to

volunteer to go early. The longer one sits dreading hearing their name called, the more frozen one will be as the cold sweat turns to ice around the heart.

## II. The Lesson

### Day 1

1. Discuss the elements of a good narrative. If students have read or viewed **The Ponder Heart**, a discussion of Edna Earle as the chatty narrator is an excellent example of the effective raconteur. Edna Earle brings her reader into the story by direct address, "My Uncle Daniel's just like your uncle, if you've got one" (p. 7). She includes rich details in her delightful anecdote: "For one thing he sprinkled that roof with lightning rods the way Grandma would sprinkle coconut on a cake, and was just as pleased with himself as she was with herself" (p. 44). Not everything Edna Earle tells us is directly to the point of her main story. The story itself is rich with meaning. It is through Edna Earle's narrative that the reader can discern universal truths about the importance of family loyalty and the treasure of the unique or eccentric among us.

2. Discuss "sandwich criticism" as a way of giving hints to others for improvement: We all know that when we create something, we take a risk. We want to have others help us improve, but a rich learning community will nurture every member. Criticism is not a forum for bashing. Our class members should know that they can create in a putdown-free environment. Each negative comment must be accompanied by two positive remarks. This way, the positive outweighs the negative.

3. Put these four topics on the board:

- A. Name Game
- B. Hall of Shame
- C. Not the Same
- D. Claim to Fame

Explain that each student is to prepare information in narrative form about each topic.

A. The Name Game is an opportunity to explain how you got your name.  
(First, last, or middle. What ever makes the best story.)

B. In the Hall of Shame, students can talk about their most eccentric relative. Every family has a black sheep or one who is notorious. Encourage them to invent one if they don't wish to share personal tales of their family. This area may be sensitive for some. Establish a sense of fun with family tales. They could adjust this area to a well-known relative. Perhaps they have a connection with someone who is famous?

C. Not the Same allows students to share something from their background or culture that is unique. It might be a recipe or a way of celebrating a holiday. It could also be a favorite children's tale from their youth

D. The Claim to Fame asks the student to tell what he is best known for now or what he would like to be known for someday.

4. Encourage students to create rich details. While they may need to take some notes, caution them not to write out a word-for-word text. This is a speaking activity and reading from the page diminishes the impact of the tales. Instruct them to prepare information in the four areas and inform them they will be in small groups, telling their tales to three or four other people. They

will probably need to interview family members at home to get ideas for parts A, B, and C. Students who are reluctant to share family information should be encouraged to invent.

## **Day 2**

Start with a general discussion of the public speaking dynamic. Tell them that they will soon be speaking a tale in front of the class. Ask them to try something with you. Have a clock with a second hand clearly visible in the room. Tell them to watch the clock without speaking or moving for exactly one minute. Say "GO!" and watch them and the clock. When the minute is up, comment on how difficult it was for some. Ask them if they realized that a minute was so long. Tell them that their first speaking task will be at least one minute and encourage them to prepare to speak so that a minute will pass quickly.

1. Break them into groups of three or four.
2. Tell them to share their narratives from A, B, C and D with each other.
3. Each group should select a moderator to make sure that all are included. The moderator should call on each to tell their part A. Then lead a discussion for each student, giving peer assistants and using sandwich criticism. In the small groups, students should assist each other in adding details, clarifying points, etc. The moderator then repeats the process through items B, C and D. This may take more than one day to accomplish if students have prepared thoughtfully.
4. Each student should submit notes from his own received comments as proof of participation in the group activity.

## **Day 3**

### **Continuation of the previous day's lesson**

1. In a general session, debrief or conclude any of the group sharing.
2. Have the students reconvene in their same small groups. Today's task is to select a recorder for the group. The recorder will note the results of a vote within each group where they discuss each student's narrative tales and suggest which of the four was the best. Each student will then prepare the best of the four for delivery to the whole class. Students may continue to offer peer assistance and practice audience in small groups during this session.

## **Day 4**

In a general session, go over Speaking Tips, and offer the handout below.

Allow class time for peer practice.

## **Day 5**

On the day(s) of the presentations, be sure that you establish an encouraging and relaxed atmosphere. You might launch the speeches by modeling your own tales in each of the four areas. Students love to see their teachers give information from their backgrounds and everyone loves stories. If you prefer not to give your own personal information, role play Edna Earle as though she (you) were a class member fulfilling the assignment. You may wish to allow volunteers or alternate calling on the shy and the bold to establish a speaking order. A quick method is preferable to a drawn-out lottery so the fearful do not build up dread.

## Assessment

Students will be evaluated based on the strength of:

- Participation in the small group hearings
- Discussion of fellow students' oral tales
- Positive suggestions given for improving oral tales
- Response to oral prompts
- Use of effective discussion skills
- Use of effective writing/research/speaking skills

The rubric for grading should be a rating in the bullet items from Speaking Tips. A student who attempts the task should receive a "C" or better.

## Extension Activities

1. This set of narrative topics could be extended to a family background research project of some length leading to an eventual written piece on family history and cultural backgrounds.

2. Students could use the four topics of narrative tasks to write about literature. Here are some suggestions:

- How would Gatsby (**The Great Gatsby** by Fitzgerald) answer the four prompts?
- How would a member of the Joad family (**Grapes of Wrath** by Steinbeck) respond to the prompt concerning the Hall of Shame?
- What story would Laura (**The Glass Menagerie** by Williams) tell in response to Claim to Fame?
- What would Christopher Newman (**The American** by James) tell us about how he got his name?
- What would Thea Kronborg (**The Song of the Lark** by Cather) tell us as her Claim to Fame?
- What would Cora ("Cora Unashamed" by Hughes) share as a story from the topic We're Not the Same?

3. Students could do interview sessions with older family members or friends, recording responses from the adults in the topic areas. They could tape the interviews and share the best stories with the class.

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## Tips for Public Speaking

**Timing:** Speak for a minimum of one minute. If you stop speaking before the minute is up, you must remain in front of the room quietly until time is called. Practice the speech aloud, timing yourself.

**Notes:** If you wish to practice with notes at home, use an outline only and not a written text. You should rehearse until you no longer need even the note card.

**Eye contact:** Include the whole audience with the sweep of your gaze. A good way to accomplish this is to rehearse with an audience. If live bodies are not available for a practice audience, then dolls or stuffed animals will work.

**Volume:** You must be heard to be judged. Those with quiet voices need to practice speaking across the room to someone who will signal you if you are too quiet.

**Posture:** A good speaking stance is relaxed but upright, hands to the sides, feet flat on the floor, chin up and proud. Don't freeze or become rigid. Don't pace or move without purpose.

**Appearance:** Wear nice, comfortable clothes. Nothing is worse than fiddling with uncomfortable garments while everyone watches. Leave your long hair alone. Don't scratch.

**Tone:** Appear enthusiastic. From the time your name is called until you sit down, act like this is the most exciting thing you could ever want to be doing with your time. Your interest in your own story will allow your audience to be interested as well. If you sound bored out of defensiveness, your audience will definitely be bored as well.

**Practice:** Practice and then practice some more.