

Parallel Cognitive Structures for Reading Literature and Reading Art as Texts to Deepen Comprehension

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Overview

The face of the Pittsburgh School District is in a state of flux. This is due primarily to the various initiatives and programs being reimagined, restructured and implemented to enhance student achievement. One of the concerns of the School District in general and the deepest concern of the African American community is the constant reference to what is termed “the achievement gap” between African American students and white and/or “other” students. This intellectual label is a constant verbal re-creation of various theories and views that purport the notion that African American students are inherently, by direct and indirect factors, of a lesser intelligence than white and/or “other” students. This “achievement gap” as well, has come to stand for low expectations, computerized rote drill and practice, busy seat work or copying which requires no critical thinking or writing skills. It also is often interpreted as undisciplined behaviors and a host of other nonintellectual and non-emotional developmental non-learning habits and activities. Perhaps the types of misunderstandings and misrepresentations manifested in learning activities are indicative of how some educators perceive and mark cultural differences in an academic setting.

What is pervasive is the lack of acknowledgement and use of African cultural elements to help students gain knowledge about the world and to, perhaps, gain insights that will make their lives more comprehensible and more balanced. According to norm referenced tests, many African American students are not scoring at the proficient or the advanced level of achievement, particularly in reading and writing. I believe that this course, “Cultural Influences on Art and Society: African Art in Context” is one way to increase my preparation for teaching reading and writing at the middle school level in that I can develop a unit that will help students make meaning from art as a text with which one transacts. African art will serve as visual images that act as purveyors of views, genius, power, history, customs, traditions and language(s) which characterize the

African cultures. In this sense, the art will function to develop or enhance cognitive frameworks that lead students from concrete to abstract conceptual visualizations.

This act of developing the skill to visualize is one of the primary reading strategies that many students lack, the ability to establish gist based on recursive connections rather than individual disconnected frames. I am looking at gist in art as the flowing together of shapes, shades, textures, color, and cultural functions of the African pieces to establish structure and form; the what and how each piece connects, negotiates, and intersects with the current African American cultural ethos. This gist is much the same in reading a written text. In narrative or prose reading, gist is based on the creation of story and construction of meaning through the flowing together of ideas, structures, and other literary devices used to develop or create a sense of sequence of happenings or the maintenance of a storyline. For an expository text, gist is the building of informational units that are established in the recursive act of reading forward and thinking back, almost simultaneously, for information to fill in the gaps.

This moving from the concrete to the abstract will help students develop automaticity and fluency of thought. I am positing that these same ways of thinking about art will transfer to the act of reading a literary text. I am also positing as well that the African art will be a comfort zone from which the students can create knowledge about self in the “spiritual hut of their ancestors.” They can come to develop the ability to interpret symbols, analyze concepts, synthesize and internalize codes of behavior and manners, and evaluate a worldview that could possibly open their lives to a greater knowing. All of these ways of thinking are congruent with Bloom’s Taxonomy, especially the higher level thinking categories and all of these are the kinds of thinking constructs that African American students need to develop and refine, particularly at the middle school level.

Further, many students are not taught enough about African culture. This unit will provide students with a much needed frame of reference with which to connect the current literature being taught. Indeed, the cultural influence on reading art will help students make meaning of what it all means. The unit will also serve as a context from which all students and particularly African American students, can position themselves. Moreover, the unit can serve as a cognitive framework for interpreting, analyzing, and evaluating the world.

The African art and the socio-historic information woven into specific learning activities will help students identify and process patterns of meaning in art as well as in the literary text. This intersecting of the aesthetic and the efferent is a dynamic relationship that not only enhances comprehension but also breathes life into and nurtures hopes and possibilities for the future. The use of cultural elements whether as art as text or as literature text as art reveal, further situate and support the notion that a variety of texts imbued with cultural content and form needs to be used in classrooms in order to educate children more wholesomely and more responsibly in a global society.

Rationale

The information provided here is meant not only to inform but also to help establish a context in which the struggling reader can engage the text for authentic purposes. For struggling readers Braunger and Lewis in *Building a Knowledge Base in Reading* note that engagement is clearly a contributing factor to the achievement gap in reading (7). So, it is important to create an environment that is flexible enough to allow for many and various literacies as well as providing models of strategies for reading comprehension, synthesizing, analyzing and interpreting, and evaluating a text. In such an environment, this context of African art will function as a text from which students can gain both efferently and aesthetically.

Of course, there is no one reason why a student struggles with reading, but there are ways to get at some of those reasons by providing a context with which the student resonates. What I mean by this is that the context of African art will function as a framework for locating cognitive structures which are not distant or unfamiliar with the psychologic geographies and literacies of the people and places with whom the students identify. In this vein, I hold in mind five theoretical perspectives noted by Richard Beach which act as frameworks for characterizing what a reader draws on while transacting with a written text. However, I will make use of these perspectives as they apply to reading art as a text.

These five theoretical positions are textual, experiential, social, psychological and cultural (Beach 8-9). Each of these perspectives is interrelated and can in significant and not so significant ways overlap another. These perspectives also serve as a way to frontload any background knowledge as well as function as a means to flesh out ways in which each of these perspectives affect the use of higher level thinking skills during and after engagement with the text. Further, since these perspectives are in constant motion and overlapping, they can also serve to remind teachers of the broad opportunities available in the pedagogical field in anticipation that they consider multiple perspectives from which to position their practice as necessary to ensure maximum support in teaching struggling readers.

In a study done by Carol D. Lee, *Signifying as a Scaffold for Literary Interpretation: The Pedagogical Implications of an African American Discourse Genre*, she cited five major criticisms that have been raised regarding literature instruction at the secondary level. These five criticisms apply to the middle level as well. They are:

1. little attention is paid to the rhetoric of the text or text structures,
2. teachers often dominate classroom discussions,
3. texts in units are not sequenced to build a body of genre knowledge,
4. texts in units are not sequenced to build knowledge of themes which would extend social knowledge that may be applied critically to the interpretation of literature, and
5. African American texts are not a meaningful part of the literature curriculum in U.S. schools (2).

Particularly within the past ten years as a middle level Communications teacher, I have attempted to grapple with these five criticisms by following the School District's scope and sequence of the current literature texts. I have as well developed teacher made mini units to make the material culturally responsive to increase the interest level of the African American students. For example when reading "Raymond's Run" by Toni Cade Bambara, I developed a mini-unit on the African American language system; its history, speech patterns and idioms. I then assigned the students to create a narrative piece in which they were to copy the writing style of the author and to purposefully use at least five speech patterns and five idioms of African American English. And, for "*The Treasure of Lemon Brown*," a short story by Walter Dean Myers, I developed a mini-unit on the "blues," and assigned the students to create and perform their own blues song using their own lives as the context. With the curriculum unit offered here, it is my intent to add to the effort of taking on the above listed criticisms as guideposts to particularly help teachers help struggling readers build comprehension skills and make significant meaning of texts.

Also mentioned by Lee is the notion that comprehension and interpretation are aided when the levels of the reader's social knowledge and the social world of the text are congruent. She implies that better readers use their social knowledge to interpret texts. This is important information because this may well be part of the problem for struggling readers who are African American. The social and cultural knowledge of African American students is often shaped by different understandings of human relationships, motivations of people in particular circumstances and the relationship between human goals and actions. This social and cultural knowledge are the cultural codes with which the student comprehends and interprets the text and often is the only knowledge that a struggling reader brings to the classroom.

African American Males and Reading

I want to say something here particularly about African American adolescent males, reading, and the achievement gap because they are the students in my classes who are the most struggling of struggling readers. It is important to see aspects of their academic struggle as it is impacted by factors that exist both inside and outside school. In addition, the future of young African American males and their life and death in this American society is a grave concern and reality of the African American community. Consequently, many community organizations have emerged in an effort to support these young people because schooling has not been the traditional method that leads to experiencing the same privileges, rewards, achievements and successes as others.

Much of the research suggests that there is a particular problem with African American males and reading. This problem is systemic and has to do with economics, class, race or ethnicity and gender. For example, Alfred Tatum cites bell hooks and Gilbert and Gilbert in *Teaching Reading to Black Adolescent Males*, as stating that black males without class privilege have always been targets of miseducation and the problems that black and working-class boys have in school may be linked with teacher perceptions

and teacher expectations. African American boys, on the other hand, have perceptions too. Particularly where their futures are concerned, many feel that the value of school is a false promise because in their environment they have seen so many adults defaulted by school (12).

Another reason for the problem is that black males may reject literacy because it does not meet their immediate needs. In my eighth grade Communications class I have a student, call him Child, who resists literacy development because as he says, “Why? I don’t need this. I’m a play football.” True to the image society sends to black males, Child believes that he does not need to be a reader. In this curriculum unit I hope to bring value to the literacy experience through African art which can function in such a way as to attract and sustain the attention of student types such as Child and help them develop both literacy skills for schooling and a cultural fund of knowledge that is of immediate use in their lives outside of school. I believe African art as a context can function as a bridge to get at some of the conditions that can help the student walk the distance between alienation from literacy experiences and academic achievement or excellence in school.

Tatum offers four barriers that stand in the way of closing the reading achievement gap between poor black adolescent males and other students. The first barrier is that no clear strategy on how to close the gap has emerged. Second, there is not clear definition of the role of literacy instruction for black males. Third, there is not agreement among educators on how to provide effective reading instruction for struggling readers who are past the primary grades. Fourth, strategy and skill instruction have been the focus while curriculum orientation, forms of pedagogy, and other factors found to be effective in increasing the reading achievement of African American students have been ignored (24).

African Art

In this overview is information to be used as the cultural context for developing the reading skills of struggling readers. This information is provided so the teacher can use it as a context for applying reading strategies which will lead students to deeper comprehension, the development and refinement of critical thinking skills and ultimately to lead students to seek a more valuable existence. It is hoped that the use of this information will enable the student to experience a cultural enrichment and awareness which will enable him/her to lessen the cultural distance that exists between home and school. Also this body of information is presented in such a straight forward fashion so that a teacher can easily pull from it to create his/her own lessons whether the emphasis has anything to do with reading comprehension or not.

Art and Society

African religious beliefs and practices are expressed in the art of their societies and these artful expressions must be seen against the backdrop of the cultures that produced it.

Mbiti states in his book *African Religions and Philosophy*, Africans are notoriously religious, and each people has its own religious system with a set of beliefs and practices, (1). Mbiti further explains that religion is the strongest element in traditional African background and is the greatest influence on the thinking and living of the African people. To ignore the traditional beliefs and practices leads to a lack of understanding of African behaviors and this includes artful expressions of objects of practical daily use now labeled as African art by Europeans and the Western world.

As seen through Western eyes and based primarily on the research of Werner Schmalenbach, an historian of Western art, the art of Africa as presented in the seats emanates a suggestive impression of something animated and alive. This is to say that the art, as part of a social cohesive is intended to serve not only in daily functionality but also as a means for rendering life more secure and protected from the influence of spiritual powers that threaten. It has been said that the living power of the wood can be felt in African sculpture even if it has been polished, darkened, or painted. In addition the magical power of a seat can be increased with the adding of cowrie shells, embossed copper or copper wire, glass beads, horns, teeth, and pieces of metal, brass tacks, or nails. Magical powers can also be increased by rubbing oil, rust, blood or other substances to its surface (15-18).

What is it that makes one see and/or feel the spirit in the wood? What is it that Africans have developed in the artful carvings that transmits to or connects with the human essence? On a metaphysical plane, it may well be because the entire belief systems of African societies permeates the pieces. It is an understanding and practice of the oneness or interconnectedness of the sacred and the secular, the religious and non-religious, and the spiritual and material aspects of life. This describes African societies whole systems of being, and art, as an expression of these systems of being then, is imbued with the life of the culture; their politics, social habits, hopes and aspirations, and fears and failures. In *The Black Church Since Frazier*, Lincoln says that art ultimately expresses for Africans, their understanding of who they are and what life holds for them (104).

Characteristics of African Art

African art is so much at one with daily living that the aesthetic quality is observed more not for what it is, but for what it does. ‘What does African art do?’, and, ‘How does it do it?’ African objects, particularly the carvings of animal and human figures as part of the seat Schmalenbach observes show an ambivalence between a state of rest and a state of unrest, an exciting combination of the measured and the dynamic (18). Some other characteristics observed by Schmalenbach of figurative creations are their frontality, the clear organization of their parts, an emphasis on the central axis and the almost total symmetry. Also observed was that figures in African art always stand or sit at rest and their effectiveness depends on and inner store of energy (180). In fact, Schmalenbach went so far as to say,

It is as if the body must keep still so that this
energy may come into its own. It is not manifest through

any continuous organic movement but finds expression in the confrontation of distinct volumes, surface patterns and body parts, and in the abrupt impact of one formal element on another.

This discontinuity and the rhythm that it inevitably sets up constitute a basic principle of African art and that is the markedly architectonic structure of their figures as in the disregard for the naturalistic proportion, (18).

Other aspects of figures as part of African seats and noted by Schmalenbach are characteristics such as the oversized, rounded head, the protruding and sometimes pointed rump and stomach, large stereometric feet and short bent legs, which all combine to produce a rhythmic entity full of tension, rich in contrasts and quite dynamic. And, though the elements are seemingly contradictory, they all intersect to show a fluidity of form. Lastly, African seats as African art are part of a collective undertaking. The seats are defined by tradition and testify to an all-embracing image of self and the world and to a direct sensual relationship with the natural and the man-made environments, (19).

Now, what does African art do and how does it do it? It creates an aesthetic in what appears to be distortion of beauty to the Western eye. In its stillness it blends and balances the physical and the spiritual, the manifest and the latent. And, it is at the intersection of opposites that a binding tension is established and pulls the eye of the beholder inward into their own making of interpretations.

African Seats as Cultural Transmission

This is not some long ago tale...

In one of Pittsburgh's predominantly African American communities, at the corner of Frankstown and Homewood Avenues and about thirty feet from the sidewalk is a patch of grass, much of which has been worn to dirt. And, where there is grass, it has grown to a little above ankle height and is noticeably green. There are also about four very tall maple trees and two evergreens that form a backdrop that gives this urban area a woody appearance. Beneath the trees are three seats that are arranged in a semicircle. This crescent moon of seats is open to the four corners of the two intersecting avenues and city traffic.

One seat is a simple cement block with a red vinyl covered pad placed on top. Another is a neon orange milk crate with black lettering, and the third seat is obviously for the most important, elderly, or ailing person. It is a green and white lawn chair, rickety with faded plastic strips latticed and frayed from use and weather. These chairs and their geometric placement, as part of a cultural web, represent shards of memory that have been transmitted from Africa through slavery. This space of seats in the African American community is where the elderly men gather in good weather to laugh, talk, and bond and to be seen in the community. What is of special note is the variation on the

African theme of having a position in the social order so that one occupies or owns a seat of corresponding artful stature and value.

Interestingly enough, yet to give theoretical credence to my observation, R. A. Freeman is cited in *African Seats* as stating that the stools of the king and chiefs having thus been placed in a semicircle in front of us, their owners took their seats and the numerous attendants seated themselves on the ground,...then the palaver began (34). Unlike the African ritual around seats however, these seats just off the corner are stationary. Each belongs only to who is sitting in the seat at the time and there is no strap attached to each seat so that it can be carried away by its owner once the circle of talk breaks up.

Here, through some purposeful quirk of subconscious memory or perhaps more appropriately, the collective conscious of a people across time and space, we can observe the murgence of ritual, beliefs, and function to create a variation on a theme from Africa to the United States. The transmission of trace elements of African culture can be detected in the concepts and beliefs that have taken shape and been given form just a few feet off the street corner. These seemingly small and often unnoticed details of everyday life are the cultural structures that make up a context in which social events, behaviors, institutions and/or processes can find intelligible articulation within constructed patterns of meaning. And, as noted by anthropologist Clifford Geertz in *The Interpretation of Cultures*, these patterns of meaning are devices which function as frameworks to shape the character and content of myth, ideology, religion, images, metaphors, customs and traditions and other social structures (144-145).

There are two points of cultural transmission here. One is the transmission of the semicircle as part of a relational dynamic. The semi-circle is open to include others thereby making it a complete and whole circle. From where the elderly men sit just off the corner, their semicircle includes all the people standing on the four corners and all the people who pass through the intersection of Frankstown and Homewood avenues. This makes the circle complete. Mbiti notes that in many African societies, circles are used as symbols of continuity of the universe. They are the symbols of eternity, of unendingness, of continuity (37).

The second point of cultural transmission has to do with the functions of elders as part of the dynamic. In Pittsburgh, the gathering of elderly men who sit in and stand around the semicircle appear to be talking and bonding, but they are as well, keeping an eye on the young teen boys who hang out on the corners as they observe the dynamics of community life. In *The Healing Drum: Wisdom Teachings*, Diallo and Hall clearly define the role of elders in stating that, Grandparents form the circle of the elders. They represent the world of knowledge and constitute the supreme council of the village. They are wise and move thoughtfully. They are the walking books of know-how. They are the judges, lawyers, catalysts, negotiators, moderators, moralizers, critics and counselors (44).

African Stools

The stool, although a secular object, is treated with religious practice and ritual. In fact, the act of carving is hedged with ritual because the tree from which the wood comes is said to be the home of a spirit which needs to be placated (Willett 156). The reason the spirit of the tree needs placated is that whatever object it is made into, that object has a spirit and both that spirit and the spirit of the tree have to live together in harmony.

Although the African stool functions as a seat, it often serves as an accessory at ceremonies where the stool is the central symbol. One such ceremony is the kisumbi rite. In this ceremony the stool reinforces and restates the basic values and principles of conduct found in some African societies. The stool is considered a highly personal item and is believed to house the soul of the owner. When the stool is not being used by its owner, it is tipped on its side so no alien force can occupy it and in so doing contaminate the owner's soul. Neither a family member nor a friend or spirit and definitely not a stranger should use the seat. In some African societies, the stool is awarded to a man who achieves a particular rank, and after the man dies, the stool is passed on to the next initiate who is related to the deceased.

Stools are often associated with leadership. "Royal Stools" which indicate the status of the owner, usually a king, and the mundane use for sitting is superceded by the symbolic meaning of unity and power. And, stools play an important role in leadership regalia as they may be carried around by the owner. After a king's death, his stool is kept in a royal ancestral shrine and ritually honored. That is, the stools of kings are commemorated and protected from spiritual contamination. Because the leader is considered to be a divine king, as Sieber notes in the book *African Furniture and Household Objects*, one aspect of his divinity was the belief that the well-being of his kingdom directly reflected the well-being of his soul (108), which the stool harbors.

Forms of Stools

The simplest form of a stool or chair was made from a suitably shaped forked branch of a tree. These took the least amount of effort to produce and provided support for neither the back nor arms but were made with precisely fixed cannon. The stools which were shaped and produced were of two basic forms. The cubic or sometimes rectangular, or more rarely square form has a deeply curved seat which appears rectangular when viewed from above. Many of these stools were monoxylous, meaning they were carved from a single piece of wood. Other stools were assembled from several parts or pieces and the seat itself was supported by one or several legs. In other instances, a stool could be a solid piece of wood with neither legs nor arm and neck rests. In many African societies the use of these stools was reserved for elderly men who would carry the stool attached by a cord and tied to their bodies when they were out.

The stool of cylindrical form is called a caryatid. These stools ranged from a simple spool or reel shape to complex geometric forms which were two or three tiered. Its seat surface is supported with human or animal figures. The figure usually carries a

burden on its back, its head, or on its hands. The usual form of the carved caryatid is of a standing or squatting figure supporting the seat on its head and raised arms. The seat is higher than the simple and cube forms but this type as well has neither back nor arm supports. This type of stool was of fine workmanship and commonly found in areas where powerful kingdoms flourished. Also, the rich or privileged decorated these stools with images, symbols and/ or themes of power (Bocola 27-33).

This form of seat has been influenced from outside Africa and primarily from Europe. Although many variations and copies exist throughout Africa, in most cases the shape of the original is self-evident. The copies were made out of scrap metal, plastic cloth, cane, iron rods, and paint. One such seat is called the praying mantis and is a copy of a European folding chair. It is only used on joyful occasions. A second type called a hwedon usually has high arms and a straight back. It is painted black and often decorated with silver ornaments. The third type of European-style chair is called the asipim and occurs in two sizes. One is what is considered by Europeans to be “normal” and the other is small enough to look as if it had been made for a child. This third type of chair has no arm, has a sloping back and is usually decorated with brass nails, knobs, and finials, (35).

All three types of chairs have leather seats and backs and are occasionally decorated with sheet metal. Since these reproductions of European-style chairs are not mechanical reproductions, very African characteristics emerged. The reproductions are elaborated or modified to represent local aesthetic or symbolic requirements.

The Golden Stool

The Asante society of Ghana has evolved a wide variety of stools to which different meanings are assigned. Sayings and proverbs which are primary ways of teaching and transmitting culture became written concepts in the form of artwork on African stools. There is also a myth entitled “The Golden Stool.” It tells the story of how the Golden Stool came to be revered as sacred among the Asante people. According to oral tradition, this stool was made of pure gold and fell from the sky at the feet of Osei Tutu who became the first Asante king. The stool signifies unity and the coverings of gold and silver leaf represent status, dignity and power. In *The Sacred Stools of the Akan*, Paul Sarpong, explains that no person whatsoever is allowed to sit on the stool and it is kept under strict security (32). It must never come in contact with the earth and is always lying on its own stool or the skin of an animal such as the leopard. The Golden Stool is not a kingly throne, but as mentioned earlier, it is the symbol of unity and kingly power and as such is the resting place of the nation’s soul.

Objectives

There are several general understandings knowledgeable teachers have that have been informed by both classroom practice and research in the field. These understandings are what Braugner and Lewis call core assumptions (58). I make use of these core assumptions and John Ogbu’s concept of cultural model as organizing principles which reflect the Pittsburgh School District’s Communications objectives.

Ogbu's model has to do with perceptions and understandings of social reality. He put forth the theory that African American students exude a host of behaviors aimed at protecting a cultural model for minority groups based on the assumption that the model is shaped by two forms of historical forces: 1) the minorities' initial terms of involuntary incorporation into the society/habitus in which it now exists, and 2) the minorities' pattern of adaptive responses to subsequent discriminatory treatment by members of the dominant group in the society/habitus.

This cultural model is particularly important where African American students are concerned because of the curious behaviors and habits of mind that have developed over time and have resulted in adaptive responses and blurred perceptions of established structures that cause difficulty in communication. Based on this model Ogbu claimed that African American students see academic achievement as a Caucasian activity. He further claimed that African Americans have historically developed a distrust of school and school people. Moreover, Perry, Steele, and Hilliard III note that Ogbu, as well, claimed that the cultural model theory holds that African Americans, in spite of this, have developed a folk theory of success based on a tradition of cultural know-how, hard work and perseverance, especially toward education (61). Developing parallel to this tradition as a result of discriminatory practices is another tradition which allows for other methods of getting ahead requiring no educational credentials and/or mainstream employment.

With Ogbu's cultural model as a theoretical starting point, I have several objectives for this curriculum unit. My first is to facilitate the development of deep comprehension by providing students opportunity to enhance critical and analytical thinking skills using cultural content. Second, is to increase the students' facility in interpreting and using symbols and images for comprehension, cultural understanding and for beginning to see themselves as part of an existing social cohesive. The third objective is to bridge areas of communications and art through an intertextual and interdisciplinary approach. Fourth is to broaden the students' exposure to culturally diverse artists and their work. Fifth is to bring students to the awareness that culture is transmitted and to the understanding of how it is transmitted. The final goal is to facilitate student understanding of African seats as part of the ongoing narrative about African culture and society. These objectives will be met based on the presentation of core beliefs and assumptions about reading, the presentation of some existing strategies for deepening comprehension of written texts and present strategies that are parallel cognitive structures for reading art as text or viewing. By developing lessons that call for students to apply these strategies to viewing African seats, I want to give and encourage struggling readers to not just read and comprehend a written text but to read and comprehend the world with all its signs, symbols and representations. For this curriculum unit, I focus wholly or in part on several of the assumptions Braugner and Lewis write in their book *Building a Knowledge Base in Reading* that are particularly applicable to the curriculum being created here (58-74). In addition, I have modified and/or adapted some of these core assumptions to accord with my needs. Each core assumption is explicated through a definite strategy that leads to developing a particular cognitive skill. And, each cognitive skill is aimed at helping struggling readers become more independent readers by enhancing and refining the higher level thinking skills while using African art as a

context. Incorporated within the lessons are strategies which facilitate achieving the specific following objectives: engagement with the text and the growth and development of comprehension skills through activating background knowledge and prior experience which includes word knowledge and vocabulary.

African Art as Text

Shifting now to African art as the text and context in which reading skills and strategies are to be taught, enhanced and/or refined, I shape into existence a curriculum that makes use of the Olkes Collection housed at Chatham College as well as information gleaned from the Pittsburgh Teachers Institute course “Cultural Influences on Art and Society: African Art in Context.” First, I selected a genre of African art that I considered would generate interest for the adolescent learners whom I teach. For this curriculum it is African Seats although any of the art subtopics studied during the Pittsburgh Teachers Institute can be adapted into the framework provided here. These topics are African Masks, African Dolls, Divination Objects, Objects of Personal Adornment, and Spirit Figures and Bush Figures.

This curriculum with the theme of African Seats will have two lessons with two activities each that build basic information about the topic while at the same time incorporating strategies that can be used before, during or after engaging a written text or art as text. The two reading comprehension strategies suggested here have been developed by Kylee Beers and can be found in each of the Elements of Literature books for the sixth, seventh and eighth grade levels. The two corresponding lessons for viewing comprehension have been adapted from visual literacy expert, Abigail Housen. The lessons are sequentially aligned with cognitive frameworks that scaffold reading strategies for deepening comprehension of written texts and parallel cognitive frameworks for reading art as text. Of course the lessons are shaped around the information presented about African Seats as cultural content that can, as I stated earlier, serve to help students gain knowledge about the world and to, perhaps, gain insights that will make their lives more comprehensible and more balanced. The strategies are congruent with an emergent motivation that can be supported by elements that shape one’s cultural identity and conscious. These elements include a real history, an awareness of codes of behavior or manner, religious and spiritual habits, and cognitive constructs and language texture. Each of these elements is reflected in the art of African people and has found expression in the art of African seats. African seats as cultural content, then, will also provide a frame of reference from which the students can position themselves and connect the current literature they are being taught.

Strategies

Core Assumption 1: Engagement is key in developing good reading skills. This includes motivation, interest, purpose and positive or negative emotional involvement.

Soldier Reece is one of my eighth grade African American male students. He named himself. He literally tumble-rolled into class one day; low, touching the floor lightly and

nimbly; first hands, then feet, no noise. I asked him just what he was doing and he replied, "I'm maneuvering from the police."

On most days Soldier Reece wears huge baggy pants with a matching hoody and tossle or baseball cap. He also wears matching tennis shoes or boots and his clothes are always clean and pressed. In class he slouches, leans, lays his head down on the table and throws his hoody over his head. This is what he does when he is not interested in the lesson and that is most days. On other days, Soldier Reece writes rap songs in his personal notebook all period. He writes for outside of school where meaning exists for him. And, his reading scores indicate that his comprehension skills are not proficient. Tatum notes that African American males are too preoccupied with thoughts of their own mortality and the energy this preoccupation requires, to think about literacy as a bridge to the future (14). Also noted by Tatum is the conception that because of the future orientation of literacy black males may reject it. Other reasons for rejection of literacy by black males are the separation of school literacy from immediate uses and its emphasis on knowledge that is not valued outside of school. Hence, as with Soldier Reece, school is perceived as the place where there is time to safely work on and practice literacies which are meaningful outside of school activities. As Soldier Reece appears to be unmotivated when it comes to engaging topics in the school curriculum, my objective then, is to provide a task specific source of energy for cognitive activity that includes reading. As Guthrie and Wigfield suggest in their article *Engagement and Motivation in Reading*, the aim is to pique the student's curiosity, enjoyment or absorption and preference for challenge (403-422).

Guthrie and Wigfield suggest that reading motivation is the individual's goals, values and beliefs with regard to the topics, processes and outcomes of reading (405). Contrary to what many believe, motivation is distinct from attitude, interest, and a reader's beliefs. African seats as the topic on which processes of comprehension are based will encourage intrinsic motivation in students who are struggling readers. Setting African seats at the topic is one way to make African art as Lee states in her study, a text that is a meaningful part of the literature curriculum.

Strategy: Anticipation Guide for Reading / Anticipation Guide for Viewing

Skill: Engagement

The strategy for building the skill of engagement is carried out in the process of developing anticipation: a desire to expect some sort of knowing or understanding that will be useful in deepening comprehension. The Anticipation Guide is meant to arouse the student's mind and emotions and encourage the student to engage the text in an active way. It is made up of three to five statements which are generalizations about the big ideas or themes in a text or an object of art. The idea is to write generalizations that help students explore what they believe about the statement, not debate the truth of the statement nor if the statement is right or wrong. The student is asked to read and respond to each statement by writing a yes-agree or a no-disagree in the space provided before each statement. After students have responded, the statements should be discussed. Here, the teacher can make use of the Guidelines for Discussion that are aimed to help students develop higher level thinking skills and give parameter that help shape a meaningful verbal dynamic. The guideline that I recommend at this stage is, "Back Up

Your Statements.” This calls for the student to not just say anything that comes to mind but to give purposeful thought to evidence or personal experience that relates to the text. Giving space for students to enter a discussion based on personal experiences, especially those from home and within their community help foster the desire to read and/or view. This is a means by which students can develop a self identity as a reader.

After the discussion, the student puts the Anticipation Guide for Reading to the side but during reading keeps it near in order to make notes as pertinent information comes up pertaining to each statement. The aim is to activate prior knowledge or make a personal connection that will give the student opportunity to foster the desire to become an active participant in learning before engaging the African seats whether in picture form or the actual object. The students can be instructed as well to re-read, respond to and discuss the statements after the initial reading of the text or engagement with the art.

In an article *Thoughts on Visual Literacy*, Philip Yenawine, in the field of visual literacy says that learning to look is, like reading, a process of stages, (2). And Elisabeth Roark, art historian, states in her article, *A Seminar in “American History Through Art*, that we are all taught how to read in grade school, but not how to look, a skill essential for survival in our ever increasingly visual culture (20). Students in more recent years are becoming very visual learners and the written text is losing its appeal among adolescents. With this understanding, I would like to offer a very simple activity for developing a parallel cognitive structure for engagement using art as text. The teacher writes very general statements about one of the African seats in the same format as the Anticipation Guide for Reading. The focus now is specifically from the perspective of art. Place the African seat in front of the room for the students to view. Allow the students to get up and come close, to examine but not to touch the seat. Allowing student to shift their field of vision helps them develop the cognitive structure comparable to perspective in literature. The teacher provides a note card on which students can jot down things that stand out about the object. These student notes are discussed briefly and are later used as student generated topics for future lessons. Next have the students respond to statements on the Anticipation Guide for Viewing and follow the same procedures for implementing the Anticipation Guide for Reading.

Core Assumption 2: Background knowledge and prior experience are critical to the reading process.

There seems to be so many occasions when students say, “What’s that?” or “I never heard of that.” That something will appear to be the most common thing for me, and that is probably why I can’t believe students have never heard of it. For example, one student asked, “What’s asparagus?” And another student volunteered, “You know, that bug (praying mantis) that’s illegal to kill.” Here a mixing of details indicates a lack of knowledge, but not “no knowledge.” In other words, students may have information but not have a frame with which to connect it in order that it is meaningful knowledge. This can be considered not only a teaching moment but also a teacher preparation moment. These are the kinds of moments which the K-W-L or S-S-S strategy can help turn into valuable teaching moments.

Recently, as I rode with a colleague, she began to talk about going to the shore when she was young. Immediately, I began to wonder how many of the students whom I teach have heard the phrase “going to the shore.” I know that I had not when I was their age and though I now have heard this phrase often, I have not yet experienced the concept firsthand. According to Anderson and Pearson, readers comprehend what they read according to what they all ready know. This is termed schema theory (60). It is a patterned way of knowing. Each culture has developed specific codes of behavior or manner that act as schemas for ways of thinking, acting, and speaking. Students come to class with patterns all ready shaped and functioning. That is why it is important to vary instructional strategies, classroom participation structures and to present content from various cultural habits and perspectives. This core assumption also includes information about and teaching of text structures and vocabulary to improve the meaning making abilities of students. Lots of opportunities to read, write and discuss in the classroom also help prior knowledge grow which in turn strengthens a student’s ability to construct meaning.

Strategy: K-W-L / S-S-S

Skill: Access Prior Knowledge

The strategy for carrying out the skill of accessing prior knowledge is K-W-L in reading and the parallel cognitive structure is S-S-S for viewing. This strategy is designed to help students gather information that they all ready know about a topic. Decide what it is that they want to know and at the end of the reading or viewing students identify or assess what it is they have learned. The format of the strategy is a graphic organizer in the form a three column chart with the first column labeled K representing the question, “What do I know?”; the second column is labeled W for, “What do I want to know”; and the third column is labeled L for, “What did I learn?” The teacher decides on a topic to be discussed and makes a model of the K-W-L graphic so all the students can see it. Next, the teacher asks the students what they know about the topic (K) and records the students’ responses. After this column is completed, the teacher leads the students in categorizing and labeling the responses into appropriate grouping. This is a side activity that helps with comparing and contrasting or distinguishing specific characteristics. The second column, W-“What do I want to know?” consists of questions formulated from the information in column K-“What Do I Know”. And, the last column, L, or “What did I learn?”, is made up primarily of responses to questions generated from the previous column. If all questions in the W-‘What do I want to know?’ column are not answered, at least students have gained new information which leads to more questions (Beers 80-86).

As Roark has stated, we are in an increasingly visual culture and most students are all eyes and bombarded with image after image. It would behoove us as educators to take advantage of this and use this visual communication and apply cognitive structures to enhance the students’ abilities to read and deepen comprehension on this level as well. The cognitive framework parallel to the K-W-L structure for reading African seats as text is a Visual Thinking Strategy based on the research of Abigail Housen. She claims that individuals at each of five stages of aesthetic development can have a strong connection to art just as people have strong connections to literature regardless of how well they read

personally. Of these five stages it is Stage I, the earliest stage and much of Stage II, that describes struggling readers. At these stages viewers are described in terms of visual literacy as being pre-literate.

It should also be noted here that students can be between stages or straddle stages. Housen describes Stage I as the Accountive Stage. That is, viewers are story tellers and use their senses, memories, and personal associations. Observations are concrete and woven into a narrative as the viewer gives accounts and makes judgments based on what is known and what is liked. This is similar to the K-column in the K-W-L strategy where K is what the reader all ready knows about the topic. For viewing the teacher introduces the parallel cognitive structure, See-Say-Search which I created based on Housen (100) and Ogle (80). It is the flip side of the K-W-L strategy in that it is made up of three questions posed in order to guide the viewer to “seeing” or having a meaningful viewing experience. It is set up in the same kind of three column format as K-W-L. The heading for each column is S. The first question, ‘What do you see going on here?’ invites students to record what they see, tell a story, or reexamine the object carefully, digging for deeper meaning. The second question, ‘What do you see that makes you say that?’ leads the students to give evidence for or back up their interpretative comments. The third question, ‘What more can you find?’ encourages students to keep searching just as in K-W-L where L is ‘What did I learn,’ is new knowledge which leads to more questions. Fundamentally, these three questions help struggling readers focus and the questions also promote extended and careful observations.

The teacher should follow the same procedures and instructions for K-W-L since the cognitive structures for completing each graphic organizer mirror the other. For initial viewings, however, the teacher should present a highly ornate and/or decorative carved stool to situate the learning dynamic so the struggling reader can experience success. The more shapes, sizes, colors, textures and materials that make up the stool, the more the students can see. The teacher in a sense “stacks the images” in the student’s favor. Of course, as students become more skilled at seeing or developing their visual literacy, the more of other aspects of the stools or content can be studied. And, as students broaden and deepen their capacity to See-Say-Search, the less ornate the stools presented in order that students can refine viewing skills. In this way students can learn beyond surface features and move into the deeper structures of meaning and refine viewing skills as they develop along the Five Stages of Aesthetic Development identified by Abigail Housen. These stages describe the viewer as being an accountive, a constructive, a classifying, an interpretive, or a re-creative viewer.

The strategies selected and those developed as parallel cognitive structures were selected because each functions to serve as a schema which allows the student easy access to information while developing thinking strategies that form a foundation for deeper comprehension. These strategies serve as parallel cognitive structures for reading a written text and for viewing the art pieces. For these activities the students should keep a special notebook entitled “Reading and Viewing Strategies” notebook in order to keep track of what they learn, have questions about or to write reflections or comments.

It is preferred that students have the opportunity to engage art pieces in a hands-on fashion but if not, photographs will have to suffice although some of the viewing opportunities as well as the aesthetics will be lost because all of the senses are not engaged. Consequently, as many objects as the teacher can bring in for viewing firsthand is recommended. And, at least one field trip per report period to a formal or informal facility housing African art should be arranged. Or, it can be arranged for someone to come to the classroom to present. This way, the students can engage the reality of the art pieces and gain a deeper felt sense of some aspects of their culture through art.

Sample Lesson Plans

Lesson One (2-4 single periods or 1-2 block periods)

What must be kept in mind during the teaching of these lessons is that the information is being scaffolded through the use of cognitive frameworks to promote deeper comprehension and to ensure that learning takes place. The process therefore should be done at a reasonable pace.

Activity 1: The teacher should first write on the board two sentence pairs of which each pair should have one statement of generalization and one statement of specificity. Have the students read each statement and determine which statement in each of the sentence pairs is the statement of generalization. The students should write the corresponding number and letter in their Reading and Viewing Strategies Notebook and should be encouraged to jot down some notes as to why they chose each statement. The note taking will help the students begin to look for context clues and to reason. In turn, the students' responses and reasons provide the basis for a discussion aimed to build the students' understanding of the meaning of generalization. Most struggling readers sit back and wait for more independent readers to do the thinking and the talking. However, because all students are asked to write notes, this activity functions to give every student the opportunity to think and reason in preparation for the discussion in which they will be asked to explain how they arrived at their answer. During discussion, the teacher can observe and assess the students' understanding of what a generalization is as well as its characteristics. The following pairs of sentences are examples, but of course teachers can make up their own as they see suitable for their particular students.

- Example: 1. a. African artists are or were in the past, uninterested in the arts of foreign civilizations.
b. African artists from Benin are or were in the past, uninterested in the arts of foreign civilizations.
2. a. African seats are or were in the past, used in ceremonies.
b. African seats are or were in the past, used in initiation ceremonies.

Next, the teacher should begin this by reading the first sentence pair aloud or by having a strong reader read it aloud. The students are asked to volunteer their answer choices and to explain how they arrived at the answers. The teacher records on the chalkboard, smartboard or overhead projector the thinking process offered by a few students. As different students offer their thinking, various schemas will emerge. This will help the most struggling of readers as they begin to make connections and see some disconnects. Students will also see other ways of putting ideas and relationships together; what they can do more and/or less of in order to refine their thinking abilities. Based on

the discussion and the schemas recorded, the teacher now leads the students in locating the similarities in each schema. Then the teacher elicits from the class a definition of generalization and some defining characteristics. The teacher finally leads the whole class in determining the correct response and giving an explanation as to why it is a generalization.

Activity 2: The statements in the Anticipation Guide for Reading are designed to get the student to begin to discuss and to expect certain information. They will be working with information about African seats to determine whether or not they believe given statements. This is an opportunity for students to use the discussion guideline, “Back Up Your Statements,” to create accountable talk. Students are to give evidence and reasons for why they believe what they say they believe or what they don’t believe. The evidence or reasons may be from personal experience or from something they have read, seen on TV or in a movie, or something someone told them. The Anticipation Guide strategy is then explained to the students and the practice sheet is passed out to each student. The teacher should make sure that each student understands the directions by reading and explaining them or having a student who is a good reader read and explain the directions.

Anticipation Guide for Reading

Directions: Read each of the statements and write ‘Yes’ in the blank if you believe the statement and can support it. Write ‘No’ in the blank if you do not believe the statement and can not support it. Complete the Before Engagement column first.

Before Engagement	After Engagement
_____ 1. No matter when African art was created, people always think it was created long ago.	_____
_____ 2. Particular types of art objects or particular styles of art are from one place in Africa.	_____
_____ 3. The great art of Africa comes from societies that have little contact with each other.	_____
_____ 4. All African arts and their makers were only concerned with objects to be used in rituals and ceremonies.	_____
_____ 5. Works done by African sculptors are art because people in the United States and Europe say they are.	_____

The Anticipation Guide for Viewing is the parallel cognitive structure for deepening comprehension. Again, the basic instructions for the Anticipation Guide for Reading are to be applied here.

Anticipation Guide for Viewing

The statements in the Anticipation Guide for Viewing are designed to get you to look for and to expect to see particular characteristics of African seats. You eventually will be viewing African seats with hands-on experience or from clearly illustrated photos. Today, though, you will determine whether you believe given statements after viewing the African seat at the front of the room. You will use the

discussion guideline, “Back Up Your Statements,” to explain your evidence. You should be ready to explain why you believe what you say you believe or what you don’t believe about the African seat.

Directions: Get up and view the seat first hand. In you notebook write down or draw shapes, sizes, colors and other things that stand out to you. Read each statement and write ‘Yes’ in the blank if you believe it and can support it. Write ‘No’ in the blank if you don’t believe the statement and can not support it. Complete the Before Engagement column first.

Before Engagement	After Engagement
<input type="checkbox"/> 1. This seat was carved long ago.	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/> 2. This seat and all seats are from one place in Africa.	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/> 3. The great art of Africa comes from societies that had little contact with other societies in Africa.	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/> 4. This seat is used only in rituals and ceremonies.	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/> 5. This seat is considered art because people in the United States and Europe say it is.	<input type="checkbox"/>

Students should complete the Anticipation Guide with any assistance needed from the teacher or peers. Lastly, review and discuss student responses and their evidence and/or reasons for belief or disbelief. The same directions should be followed for completing the same statements after engagement of the texts.

These activities are just samples, but the framework is highly adaptable and can be used with any of the information provided about African seats or any other topic that may or may not deal with African Art.

Lesson Two (2-4 single periods or 1-2 block periods)

Activity 1: The teacher draws a mind map graphic organizer on the board with the word Africa in the center of the circle. Students are instructed to copy the graphic into their notebooks and to draw lines from the circle on which they write things they know about Africa. The reason for starting broadly is to give the students enough space to enter the activity and then at some point, the class discussions. After eliciting what students know, as a whole class or in small groups have students group the knowledge and label each group. This gives students the practice of comparing and contrasting. If African seats do not appear as one of the topics, then of course the teacher has to introduce it. But, if African seats do come up, great! The rest of the categorized groupings can be saved for future comprehension activities. At this point, the teacher can introduce the K-W-L strategy. The teacher cites the three questions and explains the purpose of each: “What do you know about the topic?” which functions to help the student access prior knowledge; “What do you want to know about the topic?” which functions to get the student interacting with some portion(s) of the text (whether art or literature), and “What did you learn about the topic?”, which functions to help the student begin to construct meaning before reading the text. The teacher should also be sure to explain how these three questions function together to create a schema or pattern for thinking. The teacher should draw the following graphic organizer on the board and head each of the three columns with one of the corresponding questions. Since we are working with struggling

readers, it is not yet a good idea to have them make their own chart. It could get in the way of thinking. The K-W-L chart headings should look like the sample below.

What do you know about the topic? K	What do you want to know about the topic? W	What did you learn about the topic? L
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These columns should be filled with knowledge from the students (K), what they want to know (W) and what they learned (L) about African seats or some aspect of African seats.

Activity 2: The parallel cognitive structure for accessing prior knowledge for viewing is the See-Say-Search strategy. The graphic organizer, of course, is very similar to the K-W-L organizer. The difference lies in the text. The S-S-S chart follows.

What do you see going on here? S	What do you see that makes you say that? S	What more do you see? S
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In the case of viewing, as mentioned before, an African seat is at the front of the room for the students to view. The teacher draws a mind map graphic organizer on the board. In the circle is the topic African seat. The students are to draw this graphic organizer. For each corresponding line drawn from the circle, students write an aspect of the stool and draw as many lines as they can find aspects. This is an application of, “What do you see going on here?” As responses are elicited from students the teacher fills in the class model of the mind map with student responses. Next, by whole class or in small groups have the students group the aspects by shape, color, size, texture, or material. This provides an opportunity for students to describe, discuss and interpret what they see in the art object. The teacher, through leading discussion, records what and how students have grouped the characteristics of the stool. After this, the teacher has the students distinguish between what they see and what they think about the object. Here the student begins to draw some conclusions based on evidence gathered from viewing the stool. The question, “What do you see that makes you say that?”, is responded to here. and the last question, “What more do you see?”, directs the student to re-view or re-observe the object in order to glean as much information from the object as possible.

The key to this strategy is that the teacher is always prepared with questions or observations if the students don’t offer any and to always link the unknown to the known, the questions to the knowledge students have all ready generated.

As with any strategy, deepening comprehension should be understood to be a gradual and slow development of skills and understandings that often progress unevenly depending on steps that came or did not come before. This development should also be considered in relation to certain opportunities, exposures, and instruction. With the strategies given here, the teacher should function as a facilitator who provides for and promotes self-direction and self-discovery in visual literacy and act just as much a facilitator who provides and promotes strategies to develop independent thinking for dependent or struggling readers.

Annotated Bibliography / Resources

Teacher Bibliography

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District Content Standards for Communications

The activities in this curriculum unit meet the following Communications Standards:

2. *All students read and use a variety of techniques to make sense of various kinds of complex texts.* During this unit students will read information and participate in discussions and apply comprehension strategies that provide opportunities to comprehend texts.
3. *All students respond orally and writing to information and ideas gained by reading narrative and informational texts and use this information and ideas to make decisions and solve problems.* The activities in this unit require student to discuss interpretations and analysis to complete assignments.
6. *All students exchange information orally, including understanding and giving spoken instructions, asking and answering questions appropriate, and promoting effective group communications.* The activities in this unit require discussion and group work as students complete assignments.
7. *All students listen to and understand complex oral messages and identify the purpose, structure and use.* Students must apply this standard as they listen to instructions and directions for completing and presenting various assignments.

District Content Standards for Arts and Humanities

1. *All students describe meanings they find in various works from the visual and performing arts and literature on the basis of aesthetic understanding of the art form.* Students view and describe what they see, then relate what they see to a textual, experiential, social, psychological, and/or cultural perspectives.
2. *All students evaluate and respond critically to the works from the visual and performing arts and literature of various individuals and cultures, showing that they understand the important features of the works.* Students enact this standard when after viewing an African seat; they group characteristics of the African seat and then categorize the groupings.
3. *All students relate various works from the visual and performing arts and literature to the historical and cultural context within which they were created.* The Anticipation Guide for Viewing encourages students to think about and respond to historical and cultural information about African seats.

