

African American Folklore

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Overview

This unit is a way for students to look at their culture through the exploration of the genre folklore and the art of storytelling. The purpose of this unit is to get elementary students interested and knowledgeable about their history. This unit consists of lessons that can be taught throughout the school year or within a certain time frame. These lessons are created for a third grade classroom but can be easily adapted for any elementary grade. They can be used with a self-contained classroom or a departmentalized classroom where reading and writing are the main subject areas.

Rationale

As writing class begins, I tell my students to open up their sourcebook and write a story. I want a story that is a personal narrative. My students are to be characters within a story that had happened within their life. I looked out into the class and observed thirty sets of eyes looking as if they just saw a ghost. A common complaint amongst them was “they have nothing to write about.” They want to write about a trip to the park or McDonalds. Those two topics are fine; but do they have meaning to the student? Where is the imagination or fantasy in children’s minds today? The author William J. Faulkner writes about how he grew up listening to

stories of slavery around a campfire. He says, “it was a time of great wonder for me. This wonder led me on a reflective journey into a meaningful past.” An experience like this seems as though it would leave a lot to the imagination. The experience seems it would give any writer richness to their writing. The writing would be meaningful to the students because they “owned” their story. It came from their imagination, their thoughts, and their past from which they were a part.

When I first signed up for the class *Africans in America: Alignment of Literature with the Historical Periods of the Development of African and African-American Cultures*, I thought we would just explore different types of African-American Literature. We did just that but along with that I discovered a lot more. This literature was personal. It was about someone’s life. Folktales were not just another genre for the students to select from the library to read. The folktales were about the trials and tribulations that either they themselves or a loved one experienced. Symbolism is a BIG part of folktales. The animals were a representation of someone from the past during the days of slavery. The folktales of Brer Rabbit are a popular folktale that represents the times of slavery. The slaves had a rabbit represent a hero for them in the Brer Rabbit stories. They viewed the rabbit as an animal that is an innocent victim sought out by larger and more powerful animals. “The rabbit is small and defenseless and is viewed as the overpowered minority,” according to Faulkner. He says, “Africans used their folklore to comment on the good and evil in their lives.” He also explains that many animal stories of African-Americans were denunciations of the brutal slave system or warnings of the evil white society.

As I read several stories, I could feel the passion, anger, the hurt or whatever the author may be feeling. But of course I would never REALLY experience the feelings and emotions the slaves were experiencing. Between reading the book, *Numbering All the Bones*, by Ann Rinaldi and having countless discussions in class about segregation, I began to wonder if my students can “express their culture.” Do they have passion about their past? Do they have those emotions locked up inside? How much emotion are they holding within themselves? I teach third grade reading and writing with the vast majority African-American. When I read the book, *Numbering All the Bones*, I thought what a fantastic book for middle school students to read. It made me think about various ways to teach my students about their culture and their past. As the author Ralph Ellison put it, “the history of the American Negro is a most intimate part of American History. Through the very process of slavery came the building of the United States.” This defines my students. It explains where my students come from and how they are a part of our country’s history. They helped build the very country we live in. They are part of history and they might not even know it. It is hard to find elementary level literature that talks about what their parent, guardian, relative or neighbor encountered growing up. It is hard to find elementary level literature that talk about slavery. I recall the story told in class about

a teacher and her mother being discriminated against in Downtown Pittsburgh. Honestly, I never knew it existed in our own city! I wonder how many of my students know of stories about a parent or relative? What a teaching tool that could be to learn about their heritage? I call it a teaching tool for not only that student but for the class as well as myself.

As a teacher with a multi-cultural diverse classroom, I feel it is important to build community. The students need to feel safe within the classroom environment. And the first steps to that type of environment is the teaching and learning of various cultures. In the end, this leads to “respecting” different cultures and creating that warm environment. Being that my class is majority African-American, I feel it would be interesting to explore their culture through African-American folklore. I am interested in doing a genre study with my third graders to explore their traditions and to look at the different types of writing. As a reading teacher, I do not feel that students are exposed to many different types of genres. And when they get the opportunity to choose a book to read, they stick to the genres they know and understand. On the standardized state tests, the students are required to complete a piece of writing to either a narrative, expository, or a persuasive writing. With just reading the Anansi stories, my students are asking for more fables to read. One of the requirements of completing third grade is writing a fictional narrative. What a better way to write a fictional narrative than to write one by connecting with their own history? The students will be able to make that connection through observing the art of storytelling, reading various folklore, and storytelling their “own” history by interviewing a parent, relative, or neighbor. Then, when it’s all said and done, the students can take a field trip to a professional storyteller in Downtown Pittsburgh. They will be able to listen to age-appropriate folktales told without props, music, or puppets. This will give the students the opportunity to enjoy pure storytelling. They will get the chance to see how prosody can be magical when it comes to storytelling.

As a classroom teacher, parental and/or guardian involvement is very important. At our school, we have a parental involvement specialist that works with parents and /or guardians and the school. Yet it still is a challenge to get the parents and/or guardians involved. My thinking is, for whatever reason, it is hard to get parents and/or guardians to come to the school. However, maybe getting them involved with their child at home is the key. I think the ideal is just getting them involved with what the child is learning in school. Interviewing and talking with their parent and/or guardian will spark interest with the child. Then, to be able to take what they learned and write about it would make the child feel ownership of their writing. I think even if time permitting, inviting the parents and /or guardians to a “storytelling event” would be a great relationship builder between the families as well as you- the teacher.

Objectives

The main objective of this unit is to get my students thinking about their culture and learning about their past. I want them to realize that there are more genres in a library than just fiction and nonfiction. This unit is designed for the students to explore their culture through reading folktales. They will write a fictional narrative with the information they learned through interviewing a parent, guardian, relative or an older friend. The students will explore the art of storytelling to “tell their story” about what they had learned from their interview. The class will hold discussions around each of the trickster plays and fables that we read in class. At the end of the unit, the students can take a field trip to listen to a professional storyteller. They will get to experience all the qualities of a professional storyteller as well as experience some new folktales that they didn’t study in class.

The Pittsburgh Public School students are held accountable for their discussions through Accountable Talk. The students use a rubric to determine if they are meeting the given expectations for their discussions. The rubrics give the students a clear understanding as to what is expected of them. Are they building upon what each other have to say by agreeing and disagreeing? Are they providing reasons and supplemental information to accompany why they agree or not? Are they staying on topic? These are just a few questions that the students ask themselves to hold themselves accountable for their discussions. The students have an Accountable Talk bookmark with reminders on it. Some reminders include:

- I would like to build on what _____ said.
- I have two things to add.
- Let me see if I understand what you meant.
- I would like to disagree with _____.
- I have a different idea about that.
- Here in the text it says...
- Could someone help me understand that?
- The author’s main point seems to be...
- Another way to think about that is...
- I got this idea from something else I read.
- I want to add on...
- I’m having trouble understanding that point.
- Where did you see that idea in the chapter?
- Let’s look at the text to check that out.
- I combined ideas from both passages, and I would like to suggest...

Accountable Talk not only holds each student accountable but also provides an environment safe for children to talk. This is especially important with a topic such as one's culture that could have the potential of being a "sensitive" topic. There is even a rubric the students can use to assess themselves on the topic of Accountable Talk. In order for discussions to be successful, Accountable Talk needs to occur in the classroom. The students will receive rubrics before they write their fictional narrative. The rubric will give the students the teacher's expectations for the writing piece. The students will not have to guess what the teacher is looking for within the writing piece.

Strategies

This unit has been developed for third grade students. It is ideal for reading and writing classes. It can be easily adapted for younger grades and even higher-grade levels. This unit is ideal for the students in the Pittsburgh Public School District when they celebrate Black History Month in February.

Students will complete a variety of activities varying from role-playing to writing a fictional narrative. The students will receive rubrics that explicitly tell the students what is expected of them when they write their fictional narrative. But first the teacher needs to hold many conversations about folktales. Students need to know the purpose behind writing a folktale. There is history within the folktale. The story tells someone's experience. And being that folktales are one of the earliest forms of writing within the African culture, they often tell stories of slavery. The students must see the connection between the folktale and the representations within them. For example, an animal within a folktale might represent a slave from the South. The animal is not just an animal that is talking to another character within the story. The use of folktales such as Brer Rabbit stories would be a great help to use as models. It takes practice to visualize what the author wants you to know and understand. The concept of digging deeper into a story for meaning is a challenge for children. especially stories like Brer Rabbit and Anansi: They are read for enjoyment. Children enjoy characters that talk and associate with one another. They think of Anansi stories as amusing and for pure entertainment. As a teacher reading the stories before I did this unit; I read them for enjoyment and entertainment. It will take a lot of practice to get past that point of reading these stories for enjoyment and start to see them as "telling someone's story." It will be a challenge to view the characters as a part of the story representing someone or something from the past.

The students will observe the model of story telling done by the teacher and their peers. Students will receive collaborative help from the other students when

they give them their expectations during the closing of each lesson. At this time students gather in our meeting area. Our meeting area consists of a red carpet and an author's chair. The author's chair is a chair for our student authors when they present their writing, ideas, and/or stories. When the students present, their peers acknowledge what they liked as well as an idea or two to help them improve what they presented to the class. The teacher takes a back seat when there are students presenting. It is a student-driven time and the teacher lets them take control over their conversations. The students will also understand the standard that they are working on and be able to explain it to anyone who asks.

This unit could easily be done in a one-month's time frame. Or it can be stretched out over a period of time. During Black History Month (February) would be a perfect time to teach this. Also, a great time to teach this unit is when the students have to write a fictional narrative for their portfolios. It is really important to do each lesson to the fullest extent so the students understand the importance of each lesson. If the understanding is not there, their writings will not mean anything to them.

Classroom Activities

Lesson 1- Trickster Plays

The teacher and students will read the story, Anansi and the Magic Stick by Eric A. Kimmel. Students will discuss how Anansi was too lazy to clean his own house so he had the magic stick do all the "dirty work." But, in the end it caused more work for Anansi. The teacher will ask the students some discussion questions to help the students understand the story. Also, the teacher should help the students make connections with the text to help them feel like Anansi.

Some discussion questions might consist of:

- What was the author's purpose in writing this story?
- What was the purpose of the magic stick?
- How did it cause more work for Anansi in the end of the story?
- What lesson was to be learned in this story?
- Was there a time in your life that you acted like Anansi?
- Do you think the stick felt like a slave to Anansi?

Digging deeper:

- ❑ Where in the story do you think there is symbolism?
- ❑ What is the hidden message? What does the author want you to know?
- ❑ How would this story relate to a time of slavery?

The students will take a copy of the story Anansi and the Magic Stick and practice reading it in a small group. They will act out the story using props to introduce them to storytelling. The students should keep in mind how Anansi feels. When they read the story, they should use their voice to express the feelings within the story. The students will write about a time when they tricked someone to do something.

Lesson 2- The Purpose of Storytelling

The teacher and students will need to have a discussion about the purpose of storytelling. Storytelling is a way for the reader to have a voice with what he/she is reading. If the reader is reading something that belongs to him/her such as their own past; there would be such passion and meaning to the story being read. A discussion needs to take place as to why this folktale was written. What is the purpose of this folktale? The teacher will read the story, The Village of Round and Square Houses by Ann Grifalconi. The teacher and students should discuss who is talking in the story.

They should include the following questions in their discussion:

- ❑ Why is the woman talking?
- ❑ A woman who was the little girl in the story uniquely tells the story. The students need to have an understanding that the woman talking is describing her childhood.
- ❑ Why was it important for this woman to tell the story of her childhood?
- ❑ What purpose does it serve?
- ❑ Do you think she actually experienced the events in this story?
- ❑ How do you think she feels?
- ❑ Do you as students have a story to tell?
- ❑ Why would hearing stories from a parent, relative, or even a neighbor be important?
- ❑ What kinds of things could you learn from someone else? Learning about your heritage, family stories, where you came from (another country or city) are just a few things that you could find out by asking questions. This can lead to a discussion on interviewing. What kinds of questions do you ask? Have the students come up with a list of questions they feel would make great

interview questions. That way they feel some sort of ownership to the questions.

Lesson 3- Interviewing

Interview Questions:

- Was anyone in our family a slave?
 - If yes, who?
 - If no, were there any experiences as a child that represented the times of a slave?
- Where did they live?
- What kind of experience was it? What was it like?
- Are there any stories you can remember that you could share with me?
- What emotions were you experiencing? How did you feel? Were you scared? Hurt? Angry?
- How did you cope with your emotions?
- Did you sit around and tell stories with others?
- Do you remember any of those stories? If so, what were they?
- Can you associate any of today's folktales with the stories you experienced? For example, can you relate to Brer Rabbit stories? Do you see the association between the rabbit and a slave?

Lesson 4- Writing their own story (may take several periods)

This lesson may take a few class periods to complete. The students will take the answers to their interview questions and create their own short story. The story will be a fictional narrative. The students will develop unrealistic characters and a setting to “tell their story.”

Mini-lesson 1- graphic organizer

The students will first complete a graphic organizer. The students will create characters' names, the setting and the plot. Who will be the hero in their story? Where will the story take place? What do you want your readers to know about your story? They are brainstorming the story structure of their fictional narrative. Then the students need to take their writing through the writing process: brainstorming, rough draft, editing, revising, response group, and conferencing. Once their rough draft is written they will get into a response group comprised of their peers to receive feedback before they conference with the teacher.

Mini-Lesson 2- Opening

The students and the teacher will take a look at the typical way a fictional narrative usually begins. “Once upon a time” The teacher and the students will brainstorm a list of other story openers. The openers usually contain the elements of time and place to describe the setting. For example, “In the deepest valley in the whole world lived a young woman...” As the class comes up with story openers, the teacher will put the list on chart paper for the students to refer back to later on when they begin to write.

Lesson 4- Storytelling

Having an engaged audience shows the writers that what they have to say needs to be heard. Having an engaged audience is controlled by the storytelling. And the art of storytelling is performed by the way the reader reads his/her story. Prosodic features include pitch, loudness, tempo and rhythm, stress of words, and intonation. Therefore, a couple of lessons are needed to teach the students about prosody. The lessons should start out with a lot of modeling done by the teacher. When the teacher reads the first couple of stories, the prosodic features should be stressed and pointed out to the children. The mini-lessons can start out by using the story, Anansi and the Magic Stick. Then, as a whole class, everyone should practice reading the story by using choral reading. The class and teacher reading the same story at the same time utilize this strategy. When the students seem to have an understanding of how the story should sound, the class can move on to echo reading. The teacher will read a section of the story and the class will echo the teacher back. Once the teacher feels this is mastered, the class can move on to the next mini-lesson of Phrase-Cued Text or sometimes it is called Chunking.

Phrase-Cued Text/ Chunking

Phrase-Cued Text or Chunking is a strategy to teach students when to pause within a reading. It starts with a passage of any kind. You take the passage and put slashes where a reader would naturally pause. One slash means a brief pause. These would occur at commas and where you would naturally take a breath within a sentence. Then, at the end of a sentence, you would place two slash marks. This means that a longer pause would take place. Once the students have practiced the pausing several times; you can move on to practicing the tone and prosody of their

reading. Do their voices rise slightly when reading a question? When reading an exclamation, do they show excitement? Do they take on different voices with different characters within a story? Is there emotion within their voices? The teacher should model this a few times. Then, the students can practice their reading in small groups.

The students will gather in the meeting place within the classroom (red carpet) and share their stories. Depending on the first and second grade teachers' schedules, the students could have a storytelling time. It would give them an opportunity to share their stories. This would be a great time to involve the parents, guardians, neighbors, and/or other relatives that were involved with the interviewing process. It would show the students just how important the story they have to tell really is!

Optional- field trip

A great way to celebrate the ending of this unit is a field trip. A field trip to see a professional storyteller would be extremely beneficial to your students. They would experience a story being told without props, music, puppets, or any other distractions. The students would clearly see how prosody plays an important role in storytelling. Just like in the olden days when folktales were told for a purpose, no props were utilized. And yet the folktales were very much enjoyed. Nothing fancy was needed to keep an audience's attention.

If you search storytellers in Pittsburgh Pennsylvania, many appear. One storyteller that I searched was by the name of Scott Pavelle. He is an attorney by day and a storyteller by night. He story tells many different types of readings. One of which is a folktale. He is the President of Pittsburgh's Guild of Professional Storytellers.

Annotated Bibliography/ Resources

Annotated bibliography for teachers:

"Africa for Kids - Why Anansi Has Eight Thin Legs (Anansi Tale)." *Africa for Kids - Index of Topics*. N.p., n.d. Web. 01 June 2009.
<<http://www.africa.mrdonn.org/anansi.html>>.

Anansi is very hungry in this story. He is in luck that all his friends are making some type of food. Anansi's problem is that he is trying to figure out how he can enjoy a little bit of everyone's dinner.

Brennan, Jonathon. *When Brer Rabbit meets Coyote African-Native American literature*. Urbana: University of Illinois, 2003.

Within this book, literature, history, and culture of people of mixed African American and Native American descent is explored. The book theorizes an African-Native American literary tradition through discussions of topics in essays.

Faulkner, William J. *The Days When the Animals Talked*. Chicago: Follett Company, 1977.

This book provided insight as to why folktales were written. An explanation as to why animals talked and what they represented within the folktales. This book also provides a collection of Brer Rabbit folktales and explanations as to what they represented and why they were told.

Grifalconi, Ann. *The Village of Round and Square Houses*. Canada: Little, Brown and Company, 1986.

This folktale is about a village of Tos and how it differed from any other village in the world. A young girl tells the story as she was the young girl living in this village. In this village women had to live in round houses and the men lived in square houses.

Hughes, Langston. "Cora Unashamed." Short Story.

A book about a woman raising her young daughter during the times of slavery and prejudices that both endured.

Kimmel, Eric A. *Anansi and the Magic Stick*. N.p.: Holiday House, Inc, 2002.

Anansi the Spider steals Hyena's magic stick so he won't have to do the chores, but when the stick's magic won't stop, he gets more than he asked for.

Morrison, Toni. *a mercy*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008.

This novel tells of what lies beneath slavery. It is about a mother who sends her daughter off in order to save her.

Pellowski, Anne. *The Storytelling Handbook*. New York: Library of Congress, 1995.

This is a beginner's book on storytelling. Examples of easy-to-tell stories are offered within the book.

Rinaldi, Ann. *Numbering All the Bones*. New York: Library of Congress, 2002.

This book is a historical fiction that describes slavery during the Civil War. Even though the war had ended, it was still a difficult time for a thirteen-year old girl named Eulinda. It talks about the trials she had to endure while trying to bring peace to those who fought for freedom.

Websites for Teachers:

Tips on Storytelling

www.eldrbarry.net

Tips on how to communicate stories and show the connections between the reader and the story being told.

Storytelling in the Classroom

www.storyarts.org

Developing effective performance skills within the classroom for a successful storytelling experience.

Explanation of Prosody

http://english.unitecology.ac.nz/resources/exp_lang/prosodichtml

Exploring prosodic features within the language to improve storytelling. Examples given that can be practiced within the classroom.

ReadWriteThink: Lesson Plan The Reading Performance: Understanding Fluency

<http://www.readwritethink.org>

Lesson Plan ideas given to strengthen oral reading performances for a successful storytelling experience.

Scott Pavelle, Professional Storyteller

<http://www.pavellelaw.com>

A website on Scott Pavelle that gives information about him. The information includes examples of his storytelling, frequently asked questions and answers, and contact information.

Annotated Bibliography for Classroom

"Africa for Kids - Why Anansi Has Eight Thin Legs (Anansi Tale)." *Africa for Kids - Index of Topics*. N.p., n.d. Web. 01 June 2009.
<<http://www.africa.mrdonn.org/anansi.html>>.

Anansi is very hungry in this story. He is in luck that all his friends are making some type of food. Anansi's problem is that he is trying to figure out how he can enjoy a little bit of everyone's dinner.

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Kimmel, Eric A. *Anansi and the Magic Stick*. N.p.: Holiday House, Inc, 2002.

Anansi the Spider steals Hyena's magic stick so he won't have to do the chores, but when the stick's magic won't stop, he gets more than he bargained for.

Appendices-Standards

Pennsylvania State Standards

1.1 Learning to Read Independently

- A. Identify the purposes and types of text before reading

1.3 Reading, Analyzing, and Interpreting Literature

- B. Identify literary elements in stories describing characters, setting, and plot

1.4 Types of Writing

A. Write narrative pieces

1.5 Quality of Writing

B. Write using well-developed content appropriate for the topic

G. Present and/or defend written work for publication when appropriate.

1.6 Speaking and Listening

A. Listen to others.

C. Speak using skills appropriate to formal speech situations.

D. Contribute to discussions.

E. Participate in small and large group discussions and presentations.

Accountable Talk Evaluation

4= Advanced

3= Proficient

2= Basic

1= Below Basic

I stayed on topic with my classmates. _____

I sat quietly and listened to others without interrupting. _____

I spoke in a loud, clear voice. _____

My ideas were supported by relevant text and outside information. _____

I questioned unsupported talk and/or added on to what others were saying.

6+1 Trait Writing Model : My History

Student Name: _____

CATEGORY	4	3	2	1
Introduction (Organization)	The introduction is inviting, states the main topic and previews the structure of the paper.	The introduction clearly states the main topic and previews the structure of the paper, but is not particularly inviting to the reader.	The introduction states the main topic, but does not adequately preview the structure of the paper nor is it particularly inviting to the reader.	There is no clear introduction of the main topic or structure of the paper.
Accuracy of Facts (Content)	All supportive facts are reported accurately.	Almost all supportive facts are reported accurately.	Most supportive facts are reported accurately.	NO facts are reported OR most are inaccurately reported.
Adding Personality (Voice)	The writer seems to be writing from knowledge or experience. The author has taken the ideas and made them "his own."	The writer seems to be drawing on knowledge or experience, but there is some lack of ownership of the topic.	The writer relates some of his own knowledge or experience, but it adds nothing to the discussion of the topic.	The writer has not tried to transform the information in a personal way. The ideas and the way they are expressed seem to belong to someone else.
Capitalization & Punctuation (Conventions)	Writer makes no errors in capitalization or punctuation, so the paper is exceptionally easy to read.	Writer makes 1 or 2 errors in capitalization or punctuation, but the paper is still easy to read.	Writer makes a few errors in capitalization and/or punctuation that catch the reader's attention and interrupt the flow.	Writer makes several errors in capitalization and/or punctuation that catch the reader's attention and greatly interrupt the flow.