

A Collection of gifts



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Great Ideas For Teaching

19.5 Becoming an African Griot: Building CommUnity through Family Oral History

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I was introduced to this activity at an Umoja Conference years ago and have used it as part of my COUN 105 Transfer Success class ever since. In Umoja, community is absolutely fundamental to the learning experience, for the students, the faculty, and the staff. By tapping the intellectual and social capital represented by our students, we build community and greatly enhance the meaning of our classrooms/offices. Beyond helping keep our students in school, building community causes students to be accountable to each other's learning. Communal intelligence implies that we teach a willingness to see your own suffering and that of your sisters and brothers and take responsibility for it. Community transcends our courses and services and reaches into the "I am, because you are."

West African griots are the historians and storytellers within a tribe or community. They are genealogists, historians, spokespeople, ambassadors, musicians, teachers, warriors, interpreters, praise-singers, masters of ceremonies, advisors, and more.

African stories told by griots have been used since ancient times as a way of teaching and remembering the past. Many stories have been told about African peoples, including

those about the glory and splendor of heroes and kings. Listening to stories makes learning pleasant and interesting and the warm, informal atmosphere in which the tales are told binds people together.

An African story is neither read nor recorded in Africa. Instead, it is recited on the spot at the time of the telling of the story. Storytellers work on the feelings and imaginations of their audience. The most renowned storytellers invent words, compose songs, and imitate animals, people and sounds in their stories. Storytellers mime and dance, they sing songs, they act the various roles with a dramatic use of tone and inflections.

This assignment is given in order to connect students to their past as a way to look forward to their future. There is much to be gained from the stories passed down in families through the generations. To complete this assignment, students will interview family members and research information about their families. They are given categories of questions to ask such as: highest education level reached, careers pursued, travels ... Students take notes during the interviews and write a story about their families. As a final presentation, students are asked to select a story or incident that they learned about their families and present it in griot form.

Details:

- 1) Students interview at least one older relative or friend who is familiar with their family history. (Try to interview the person who can remember back the farthest.)

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- 2) During the interview, they will gather information for their story, taking notes including dates, full names and places of events, and details. If there are photos, documents or artifacts that they are able to use for their presentations, all the better.
- 3) Next, they will create a story from the information gathered and present it to the class. Students are encouraged to use props, music, costumes and artifacts as needed.
- 4) A minimum 2 page written reflection about the experience, lessons learned, and historical knowledge gathered is due as part of this project.

Over the years, students have discovered wonderful stories about their family histories that they did not know, stories which help to serve as motivation when challenges occur in their lives. These become their “Why.”

Student presentations are impactful as they are encouraged to be creative when telling their stories. In the past, I’ve had students sing, perform spoken word poetry, or dance. One student prepared a dish in class that he used to make with his grandmother. Upon finishing the story (within 3 minutes), he handed out samples of his dish, prepared the night before, to the class, bringing everyone into his family. It was well rehearsed and powerful as he described the interaction.

The sharing of stories has been great for building community and something that helps to strengthen relationships within the class. ❧