

African & African American Storytelling Unit Plan

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Course: Vocational Related/Cooperative Child Care (Family & Consumer Sciences Department)
Grade: 11th & 12th Grade,

Standards to be addressed

- Read from a variety of genres for a variety of purposes.
 - Read a lot.
 - Read & comprehend a variety of literary and nonfiction genres.

- Write in a variety of genres for a variety of purposes.
 - Share events and tell stories through narrative writing, both fictional and autobiographical.
 - Inform others through reports or informational writing.
 - Explain a procedure through narrative writing.

- Speak effectively. Listen critically, and respond to visual and auditory media.
 - Participate in group activities.
 - Prepare and deliver individual and group presentations.

Scope

The Vocational/Cooperative Early Childhood Education and Care Program is a two-year program that prepares students for entry-level positions in the child care industry. The curriculum in part consists of planning, preparing and presenting activities for young children. Each class is in session for one eighty minute block five days per week. During this time there are opportunities for the high school students to have direct interaction with young children. A unit on storytelling fits nicely into the curriculum during the second marking period as the students are beginning to learn about preparing learning environments.

Goals/Objectives (Academic Competencies: Early Childhood Education)

- Explore and analyze a variety of cultural elements, attitudes, beliefs, and value structures by reading
- Read to facilitate content learning

- Apply an expanding vocabulary gained through reading
- Use reference books to find, evaluate, and synthesize information
- Write in a journal or learning log to clarify personal thinking and knowledge
- Listen attentively during oral reading
- Participate in informal speaking activities
- Use interviewing techniques to gather information
- Communicate orally to entertain and inform
- Develop oral projects collaboratively

Key Words

Brer Rabbit

Uncle Remus

Joel Chandler Harris

Augusta Baker

Storytelling (African American)

Storytelling (African)

Zora Neale Hurston

Ananzi the Spider

Gullah Tales

Oral History (Oral Traditions)

Great Migration Project
Background/Introduction

African American storytelling and oral traditions can be traced to the beginnings of American slavery, first introduced to this continent by black Africans captured and sold by slave traders. During the days of enslavement, the historical presence of Africa helped to ensure the survival of families in the culture. Language usage, folktales, and religious practices from the homeland were the source of an almost limitless number of songs, spirituals, and stories passed from generation to generation. “The beauty of

the spoken word shone brightly, lending meaning to the past and nurturing the strength and hope needed for times to come.” (Stories and Folktales Through the Years)

Songs or chants were sung while working. Work songs often set the rhythm as well as relieved the tedium of repetitious motion. The songs were sung by individuals or by groups and were usually accompanied by the sounds of the tools or the bodies at work. Many of the songs were about the work itself, yet some were about the food, drink, or other pleasure to be enjoyed after the work was done. For example, cumulative or counting songs may have marked off rows mowed, shovels lifted, or the drinks to be consumed later. Work songs and ballads also tell stories. African American work songs included stories about everyday life and about heroes such as the remarkable railroad worker, John Henry. (Storytelling Encyclopedia)

Many of the themes and characters of African American storytelling can be traced back to the African homeland, including ghost, animals and tricksters. Joel Chandler Harris was one of the first writers to attempt to compile stories from the African American oral tradition. Chandler’s collections have often been criticized for presenting a simplistic and even sentimental view of the American slave as a mindlessly faithful and cheerful character. His *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings* (1881) is devoted

to animal stories, including those of Brer Rabbit. Perhaps the best known of these is the story of Tar Baby, in which the trickster (Brer Rabbit) gets caught as he attacks the tar doll until he becomes stuck to it.

Versions of the tar-baby story can be found all over the globe, however, the widest dispersal of the tale is found in western Africa. This tale has been studied extensively by those seeking answers to questions of old world tale diffusion and the widespread use of animal tales in African and oral tradition. In order to placate eavesdropping slaveholders, the slaves used Brer Rabbit as their hero, often representing him as a helpless creature. They wittingly however, gave their “hero” characteristics that allowed him to “outdo” bigger and stronger animals. (Lay Down Body)

These animal fables may suggest that an individual in a position of little or no power can achieve small triumphs over the powerful through verbal tricks and general cunning. (Storytelling Encyclopedia) According to The South Carolina Negro Folklore Guild (1945) another possible explanation for the domination of animal tales in the field of American Negro folklore is that largely through the work of pioneers like Joel Chandler Harris and Allen, Ware, and Garrison, the animal tales established themselves as an art form for the entertainment of white audiences.

Creole folklore comes from the Gullah African Americans living on the Carolina Sea Islands. Gullah is a language that combines West Africa dialect with English. The figure of Spider, the animal trickster also known as Anansi, appears in the tales of the Gullah. Other trickster figures such as Tortoise also appear in their tales. DuBose Heyward's novel *Porgy*, on which the Gershwin opera *Porgy and Bess* was based, was written in Gullah dialect. (Storytelling Encyclopedia)

Zora Neale Hurston in her book *Mules and Men*, (1935) discusses how the telling and reciting of tales took place in social interaction. Community members chimed in with their jokes and parables in response to the social topic at hand. The storytelling event (known as "lyin" sessions) often took place while sitting on the porch. There was also much repartee (called "woofing") often of a sexual nature and always depending on very quick verbal wit. Many of the tales Hurston records are original stories. Although there is much denigration of womanhood at this time, Hurston records the forceful and witty responses of women. Sexual politics and women's resilience appear to be favorite themes for Hurston.

Oral traditions in Africa include a variety of oral forms such as epics, tales, riddles, poetry and proverbs. Most stories have lessons to learn. Some African performers have used the oral tradition to document centuries of

history and to pass on cultural practices over generations. Performers

suggest that the age of the gods gave way to the age of the hero, who tries to restore order on the model of nature. The hero is a composite of all elements of nature and society. Many African stories seem to be a bit spiritual in nature.

The African oral tradition is not simply a spoken art; it is an event, a ritual and a performance. Performers use metaphor to take an audience's routine experiences and link them to ancient, often fantastic images from the artistic tradition. (**Oral Traditions** in Africa, Microsoft Encarta Aficana)

As we can see, storytelling has a rich history in the African and African American culture. Today, exposure to the art of storytelling is scanty at best in the lives of many African American children and adults as well.

Reading of course, increases vocabulary development. Children need to be exposed to lots of literature. I believe if the selection of the literature is by and about people like them, then a love of literature will follow. African American children should be provided with information regarding their rich history and culture in the art of storytelling. This information will help to develop a sense of pride and self confidence needed to compete and be successful in the world today. As children study the authors and illustrators of African American folklore, they will begin to internalize the concept that

reading is talk written down. This will also expand their concepts of the variety of career available to African Americans. Through reading, listening to stories, conducting oral interviews, presenting stories and writing stories, young people will become better readers, writers, listeners and speakers.

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Day One

Objective(s): Students will read a picture storybook, tell why they like or dislike it and with a partner present the book to the class in a creative way.

Learning Activities/Teaching Strategies

- **Journal Topic**: Why do people read and tell stories? What are the benefits? (5 minutes) Discussion of journal entries. (5 minutes)
- **Read** “The Tales of Uncle Remus/The Adventures of Brer Rabbit” as told by Julius Lester. (10 minutes)
- The following **questions** will be orally discussed after reading the story: (10 minutes)
 - What did you like about the story?
 - Was there anything you did not like about the story?
 - What are the lessons that can be learned from this story?
 - What was the theme of the story?
 - Would this be a good story to share with young children? Explain why or why not.
- **Turn to a partner** and **brainstorm** some possible ways to extend (conduct related activities in addition to reading) the story. Share the brainstorm session with the class. (10 minutes)
 - Possible story extensions may include:
 - Acting out the story
 - Telling the story
 - Presenting a flannel board story

- Recording the story on tape and providing cut outs of characters for children to use individually
 - Classify the animals in the story in different ways: the ones that play tricks, the ones that are big, the ones that are mean, the ones that help Brer Rabbit.
 - Make a Brer Rabbit salad
 - Draw pictures of the story (make a story board)
- **With a partner** select and **read** another Brer Rabbit tale. Decide on, **prepare and present** the story in a creative alternative way (story extension). (40 Minutes)

Materials

The Tales of Uncle Remus: The Adventures of Brer Rabbit and other Brer Rabbit stories.

Paper, markers, scissors, glue sticks, flannel material, tape recorder and blank tapes.

Day Two

Objective(s): Given research topics and reference materials on the history and meaning of African American storytelling, students will read about and report on the comprehension of materials.

Learning Activities/Teaching Strategies

- **Journal Topic**: How long do you think people have been telling stories? Are there any stories that have people told each other for generation? Describe the stories, sayings, lessons, and warnings told to you by an adult when you were younger. (20 minutes including discussion)
- Yesterday, we read about Brer Rabbit. The story of Brer Rabbit has its roots in the African culture. I have identified reference books and internet sites for you to look at in order for you to discover how the Brer Rabbit story and other animal stories connected with African and African American history and culture. You may find that different sources give different meaning to “animal stories” especially during the days of slavery. For additional independent internet searches try the following keywords: African American Storytelling, Brer Rabbit,

Uncle Remus, Trickster, Joel Chandler Harris, Julius Lester, Newberry Medal Award, Animal Stories. Take notes and share the results of your research. What did you learn? What did you find interesting? (**Research and whole class discussion** - 60 minutes)

Materials

Computers/internet sites

Reference materials (see bibliography)

Day Three

Objective(s) Students will write an original story, share in reading a story and practice speaking in Gullah.

Learning Activities/Teaching Strategies

- **Introduction and Journal:** Zora Neale Hurston, a famous African American storyteller talks about how African Americans used to sit around on the porch conversing. It seemed as though the longer they sat, the bigger and bigger the stories got and often further and further away from the truth. She called these “lyin” sessions. Your task now is to **write a short story in which the truth is stretched just a bit.** It could be an explanation of how and why things work, why you came home late from a party, what happened to your sister’s favorite sweater that you wore, etc. Be prepared to share stories with the class. (30 minutes)
- In your research yesterday, some of you may have come across information on Anansi the Spider. Anansi is an old favorite folk hero and the story Anansi the Spider: A Tale from the Ashanti has its roots in West Africa. Anansi is Saved by his six sons, yet he cannot decide which will the prize, the moon, and is set in the Sky instead. This story is yet **another example of how people sometimes make up stories to explain how and why things happen.** I am going to pass the book around and each of us will **read a page in the book until the story has been completed.**

Students will briefly discuss their feelings about the book and identify questions that could be used to review the book with young children. (15 minutes)

Another reason I have chosen to share Anansi with you today is because it was a favorite and also has roots in the Gullah community of southern region of the United States. Has any one heard of Gullah? I have a little article I would like for us to **read** that explains Gullah. After that, we will **practice speaking Gullah words**. (35 minutes)

Materials

Anansi the Spider: A Tale from the Ashanti Storybook
An Introduction to Gullah Textbook

Day Four

Objective(s):

- Students will practice active listening and interviewing skills
- Working in pairs, students will interview one another and will deliver presentations about their interview of each other.
- Students will identify and apply specific guidelines for completing successful interviews.
- Students will identify appropriate interview questions.

Learning Activities/Teaching Strategies

- **Introduction/Opening Activity:** It is the custom in the African and African American culture to pass down rituals and traditions by way of the mouth or talking. Until more recent times many of the traditional customs were not written down. The practice of transmitting information from generation to generation by word of mouth is called oral history. Many stories are captured and lessons learned though this process called oral history. We common think of interviewing as something we do to get a job. We are familiar with the process of an employer asking questions to a potential employee. Interviewing is also a method we can use to capture information from our elders before they pass away. We do the asking of the questions.
- Everyone has a story to tell. Let's prove it. You have been around your **classmates** for a while now. How well do you know them? At

- this time you will pair up with one other person and **interview** them. Ask questions to get to know your partner a little better. Be careful not to ask questions that are too personal and also stay away from yes/no type questions. Find out about the person's life, family, goals, aspirations and childhood experiences. Be prepared to share something you learned about your partner. (30 minutes)
- Today, I have invited a guest for you to interview. She is a teacher here and was born and raised in Charleston, South Carolina's Gullah community. Before she arrives let's **review some guidelines for interviewing**. (20 minutes)
 - **Interview guest**. (30 minutes)
 - **Homework** (Due Monday) Interview an elderly relative or family friend. Find out about their past.

Materials

Interview guidelines handouts (Forms 59-1, 61-1 from *Writing Smarter!* by Keith Manos)

Types of Questions for interview sheet (Form 60-1 *Writing Smarter!*)

Sample Interview worksheet (Form 60-2 from *Writing Smarter!*)

Day Five

Objective(s): Students will view and discuss video tape "*Tales from the Land of Gullah*".

Learning Activities/Teaching Strategies

View and discuss the video tape "*Tales from the Land of Gullah*".
(60 minute video tape, 10 minute discussion)

Materials

Video tape – "*Tales from the Land of Gullah*"

Culminating Activity

Students will write a story about any of the topics we discussed during this unit. Topics may include Brer Rabbit, Anansi, The Spider, or any other animal story, the History of African American Storytelling, the Gullah language and culture, Oral Interviews(the value of), and Gullah tales. The attached rubric will be discussed in advance so that student will know what is expected of this project.