

Modern Africa in the Classroom

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Preface

The primary goal of our workshop was to generate strategies for teaching about Africa in ways that reflect the continent's rich history, its social and cultural diversity, and its relevance to today's global issues. The process involved introducing Fellows to a selection of major themes in African history and culture, exposing them to a sample of the best new scholarship in African Studies, and sharing some of the literary, visual, and electronic resources available locally for the study of the continent. We spent a good deal of time discussing the stereotypes that shape our popular ideas about Africa and finding ways to counter those stereotypes for students at different stages of learning. Building on each Fellow's particular interests and classroom needs, we worked to identify topics that incorporated African material while meeting the content standards of the Philadelphia school curriculum. Our aim was to find ways to enrich students' understanding of Africa's place in world cultures without making the African experience seem strange or exotic. The end result was a series of multi-dimensional curriculum units tailored to meet the unique classroom needs of the participating Fellows but readily adaptable for implementation in other grades and school settings.

"Mobile Africa" illustrates how mobility in the form of both voluntary and involuntary migration has shaped African cultures from ancient times to the present. Beginning with the migrations of our human ancestors within and out of Africa, movement has enabled Africans to survive and adapt. Whether in response to drought and desertification, to the forced migration of the Atlantic slave trade, or to the labor demands of the European colonial and modern world economies, mobility (rather than stagnation and isolation) has been a central theme in the history of Africa and its diaspora. Developed for high school students, this unit also emphasizes the complementary theme of Africans' and African-Americans' adaptation to new environments, new challenges, and new opportunities throughout their history.

"What's Cooking in Africa?" was designed for a Life Skills classroom of high school students with special needs. In addition to introducing students to a variety of African foods which can be purchased in local markets and prepared in cooking classes, this unit uses maps and photos to introduce teachers and students to the variety of African staples grown in different ecological zones on the continent; to the cycle of planting, harvesting, marketing, and cooking of African foodstuffs; to the etiquette of eating (and sharing) in African households; and to the interesting history of African food crops that moved across the Atlantic to form a part of modern American cuisine.

"Masquerading in Western Africa" is targeted to elementary students in a school with many new African immigrants. It focuses on West African life-cycle rituals and annual ceremonies where dancing, musical instruments, and masking are combined to commemorate events from birth to death, planting to harvest. Students not only will

make their own masks and musical instruments, but will observe their use in Africa on videos. The wide range of captivating masks illustrated in African art books will give students the opportunity to use their artistic imaginations as they discuss the materials used in making masks, the symbolic meaning of different masks, and the occasions when masks and music are used in our own society.

“Tell Me About It: The Africa I Left Behind” explores African storytelling traditions. These include the heroic epics of old Mali transmitted over the generations by specialists known as griots, as well as the folktales told by storytellers to instruct and entertain African children. Special attention is given to stories from Liberia and Nigeria, the home countries for many of Philadelphia’s new African immigrants and refugees. Many of these primary-level students are just beginning to learn to read and write in English. By using African stories in the classroom and encouraging the children to collect folk tales from their families at home, this unit enables African children to make use of their own heritage and share it with their American classmates while involving their parents in the learning process.

--Lee V. Cassanelli, Associate Professor of History