



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1984 Volume IV: The Oral Tradition

Talkin Loud Black Oral Tradition

Curriculum Unit 84.04.05
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This unit is a continuation of a unit done last year for the Yale New Haven Teachers Institute. Last year's unit dealt with finding a connection between African and Black American folktales, and collecting tales.

For this unit I collected stories at large and worked on developing methods for analysis, synthesis, evaluation, and application to the stories collected. Students need to be made aware of the value of the oral tradition and the purpose it has served for Black people historically and currently.

Keeping the culture alive and preserving the folk system of a group is an important reason for folk stories.

Black Americans have an oral tradition which is a historical and social phenomenon. The oral tradition of the African societies and the necessity for oral traditions as a result of the slave system has helped the Black culture survive.

Dialect is an important aspect of a folk system. The presence of a dialect is one of the elements that confirms and maintains the folk system. It is important, when collecting folk stories, to keep this dialect intact.

The problem of maintaining the dialect can be enormous when attempting to collect folk stories. When people are first asked to tell stories their initial response is usually disbelief. People tend not to believe that: 1. the request is straightforward 2. the stories should remain in the form that they are normally told with the dialect and with the language that would normally be used and 3. the type of story that is told could be appreciated by any group other than their own, and that the story is inappropriate for others.

Inquiry creates the possibility of contaminating the story. Therefore, while collecting these stories it is necessary to make people believe what they have to offer is valuable for what they say and for how they say it because each storyteller is preserving the culture, and to change any part for the sake of making it more "acceptable" spoils the story.

The idea of the orality of Black people needs to be stressed to the storytellers as well as to the students. The orality of Black people mirrors socioeconomic conditions, place, and experience.

For this unit folk stories from several sources have been collected. Urban, rural, young and old people were asked for stories. For classroom use it was necessary to have some examples from a variety of sources, and to include stories told by young people so that the students can see how they and their peers are able to fit into

the scheme of the oral tradition.

Once the student realizes their importance to the continuation of the oral system, they can perhaps begin to empathize with people who are older or live in a different place.

The stories contributed by the young people were done in the form of raps, the talking rhythms that young people listen to today. These raps are sometimes memorized by young people and sometimes they are ad libbed. This ad libbing and memorization are important aspects of the larger matrix of the black folk tradition because as the stories are told and retold they are changed and made slightly different by the storytellers.

The stories collected have some of the same general ideas that are part of the raps. They are memorized, and altered as told or they are made up from another known story.

Each storyteller, like each rapper, makes the story his own in the telling of the story. The use of these two kinds of oralities is very important for the use of this unit in the classroom. One has the possibilities of teaching historical lessons from the past, and the other teaches some of the folk culture of today.

There are several classroom goals and activities that can be achieved and used in conjunction with the stories collected and the stories to be collected.

Although stories were collected at large for use in the classroom, that does not satisfy the need for a method of exploring what is collected for use in the classroom.

The stories need to be used for practical purposes as well as for academic purposes. The student as well as the teacher need to feel that they are in a process of developing and integrating the classroom with the real world, particularly to the student's world. These stories can provide this, however, that does not necessarily happen without some structure, and an outline and method for investigation.

The student as well as the teacher need assistance in determining what to do with the folk stories after they have read and collected some of them. The stories should be used, applied to different situations, evaluated, and closely examined for the purposes of combining the student's school life with real life.

Methods for examining the folk stories collected and read was developed which included several activities to help students learn how to make inquiries and how to apply them to both a school situation and to life situations. These methods include synthesis, analysis, application and evaluation of the stories collected as well as the stories read in class.

An example of how to use a story following the methods prescribed is also included.

Synthesis

When students are able to compile, categorize, modify or rearrange what they have learned, this process is synthesis.

Students need to synthesize what is intended for the course, and in order to achieve this goal, students will tell stories themselves, rearrange stories they have heard, and compile the folk stories that they are collecting

themselves.

Students in the classroom probably already know a few raps. They should be encouraged to begin collecting for the folk tradition with themselves. Each student should “perform” a rap for the class. This performance should be recorded as the beginning stage of collecting folk stories. This activity gets the student personally involved.

Once students have placed their own raps on tape they should move out and begin to collect stories from their community. Their community should include family and friends. Once the students have collected these stories they should return and retell the story to the class, Wherever possible they should use tape recorders. If recorders are unavailable, they should be encouraged to use the “voice” of the story teller.

Analysis

Analysis is the process of differentiating, distinguishing, identifying, separating, and subdividing the material covered. Students should be able to recognize unstated assumptions in the folk stories, be able to identify logical fallacies of the folk stories that interfere with reason, and also distinguish between facts and inferences.

Students will analyze the stories they collect by recognizing unstated assumptions about black people and their folklore and determine whether the assumptions are valid or not. One assumption is that all folk stories are rural and told strictly by old people. When they realize their own contribution through the raps they will see that this is not a valid assumption.

In the second step of analysis, students will distinguish between facts and inferences. This should be enjoyable for the student when they think of how real or unreal the stories are.

At this point, students need to make distinctions between what are facts and what are inferences. Students should be asked whether the stories that they have collected thus far are true, and if not, what purpose do they serve. Each story they collect should have this distinction made about it.

There are several good writing assignments that go along with collecting and retelling folkstories and these need to be done with the class. Suggestions will be given later in the unit on these assignments.

Application

Application of the information from the folk stories includes changing, demonstrating, modifying, preparing, producing, and using the material covered. Students should be able to apply concepts and principles to new situations, apply the stories to practical situations, construct models to solve personal or societal problems and demonstrate a use of the stories.

The application of the stories can be demonstrated in several ways. Students will be able to modify what they have learned in other areas to help other students discover how to learn.

A classroom activity which will help students apply another level of the power of the oral tradition is a way of being successful in school by learning facts. Students can prepare educational or informational raps that would stimulate other students. These educational raps can help students demonstrate how to learn history, biology, math, a foreign language, or they can teach them or give them information on more contemporary issues like the use of drugs.

The students who worked with me composed a rap about the use and abuse of marijuana, the last line of the rap was:

“don’ choke, don’ smoke, everybody’s smokin’ chokin’ on dope.”

Students who are artistic and able to use puppetry can do storytelling for elementary school students. These stories that are disseminated to the elementary schools should be the stories that the students collected, read, and the raps they composed. This visual method, the puppetry couples easily with the oral tradition. However, before the student’s use the puppets for the younger students, they should evaluate the use and the purpose of the stories they have collected to see which would be most appropriate.

Another method of getting students interested and working hard on storytelling is by incorporating stories told by Black comedians like Richard Pryor, Bill Cosby, or Eddie Murphy. Many of the students already listen to these comedians, but don’t realize that they (the comedians) like the other storytellers used in this unit are preserving the Black oral tradition of storytelling.

These comedians use a similar style of many black urban folklorists. They combine humor and enliven the stories with the realism of everyday events and are able to tell stories that entertain, explain, or teach.

Evaluation

The process of evaluation of the material covered consists of appraising, comparing, contrasting, criticizing, explaining, justifying, interpreting, and summarizing the folk stories collected and read in class. Students will judge the logical consistency of the stories, judge the value of the stories by internal criteria and by external criteria.

Students might evaluate what they have researched by comparing the stories of the storytellers to those of the comedians, summarizing the differences and similarities and report to the class and finally judge the value of the stories by use of internal criteria.

Much of the evaluation becomes subjective because it involves judgment without the necessity of external criteria.

There are several sources of Black folklore; the stories collected by Julius Lester in *Black Folktales*, is an excellent source and is available within the school system. This is one book chosen for that reason particularly since acquisition of classroom materials is at times a problem. The Lester book and the folklore collected by Langston Hughes in *The Book of Negro Folklore* should be used to assist students in developing methods for analysis, synthesis, evaluation and application in the classroom. Newer collections that might also be used are *Mother Wit From the Laughing Barrel* by Alan Dundes, and Harld Courlander’s *A Treasury of Afro-American Folklore* .

The folk story chosen for synthesis, analysis, evaluation, and application was the stories about StagoLee. This character is familiar to students, information about the character is familiar to students, information about the character as well as several versions of the story exist, and even though the stories have been fashioned by the community over time it is not so out of synch with time that the urban student of the 1980s cannot relate to the information covered and given about the character.

Analysis of StagoLee ¹

In the story of StagoLee from the book by Julius Lester, the main character, StagoLee, is a city person. StagoLee participates in the kind of activities usually identified with city life. He gambles, fights, defies the law, refuses to obey man's laws of morality, and ultimately defies death and attempts to defy the laws of God. He is what many of the students would consider to be a "bad dude". Students can be helped to understand that those attributes that are valued in the city can be part of folk stories and that folk stories are not solely a rural occurrence.

Everything that StagoLee (to Stackolee) does is bigger and bolder than any ordinary man could or would attempt to do. In the Lester version there are several inferences made as to the prowess of StagoLee. Whenever someone gets in his way or does him wrong, StagoLee shoots and kills the person. Obviously students should be made to realize that this is not a way to handle a problem or a person.

StagoLee has more affection for his hat than any person, and when Billy Lyons spits on his hat, StagoLee shoots Billy and moves in with Billy's wife.

StagoLee also could not be killed by ordinary methods; he was hanged and did not die. Another inference about StagoLee and death was that he was so fierce that death would not touch him, and it took a thunderbolt sent from God to kill him. This would seem to be the end of the story, but the final part of the legend is that once StagoLee did die and went to Hell, he ruled Hell.

This folktale is full of inferences, to help students sort out the facts represented in this story the StagoLee story of the Lester book should be compared to the stories about StagoLee in the Hughes book on Black folklore, *The Book of Negro Folklore* .

In the Hughes book there are two versions of the story of StagoLee, "Stackolee" and "Stackalee" ² By comparing the three stories it can be assumed that: 1. there was a man named StagoLee 2. that he possessed a violent streak 3. the character probably did wear a stetson hat and 4. the character met with a violent end 5. it is usually assumed that he went straight to Hell and ruled over Hell.

This story is excellent for establishing the probabilities of truths as opposed to the exaggeration of legends; it reaches the student where the student lives, teaches practical and moral wisdom, and is a good example of a popular legend, and has been reinforced by word of mouth. ³

Synthesis of StagoLee

There are several methods for synthesis of this particular tale. One method is to have students retell the story. The three stories should be used so that students can rewrite a story that could include elements of each story and then each student will tell the story in their own words. The story of StagoLee should be rearranged, common themes extracted and a new version written.

Evaluation of Stagolee

The Stagolee stories can be evaluated or judged by answering several questions: 1) Is the written material in each story consistent? 2) Are the conclusions of the stories adequately supported by data? 3) What are the underlying moral and values of the story and is there a moral lesson to be learned from the story?

Application of Stagolee

The components of the Stagolee stories can be applied to the modern folk heroes. Students should examine those traits of Stagolee that are admirable; for example his belief in himself, his determination to control his own destiny, and his humor.

A similar use of traditional stories of the purposes of analysis, synthesis, application and evaluation can be done for other stories in *Black Folktales* by Julius Lester and *The Book of Negro Folklore* by Langston Hughes.

The use of dialect in folk stories as mentioned previously is one of the important aspects of maintaining the folk system. In the Hughes book there are two short story/poems which students can read aloud to practice what dialect sounds like and how one author writes what is said. The stories are "Tad's Advice to his Son" and "Old Sister's Advice to her Daughter".

Both stories deal with similar themes and are short enough so that students can practice and "perform" the stories for class.

Since the theme is not to trust a member of the opposite sex, the boys can perform "Tad's Advice to his Son" and the girls "Old Sister's Advice to her Daughter."

There are several other sources of Black folklore that use dialect, *The Book of Negro Folklore* is full of stories with dialect; another excellent source of stories written in dialect is *Mules and Men* by Zora Neale Hurston.

Sample Lesson 1

Objective:

Students should understand that folk stories change as time passes and they are told and retold, and that events that happened in our history influence how and what are told in the folk stories.

1. Have each student read "High John the Conqueror" from *Black Folktales*.
Select five students who will retell the story of "High John. The five students should be as
2. diverse as possible with male and females and also with different interests. Also some of the students who did not like the story should be chosen.
Students will take notes on the various stories so that they can refer back to them for information during discussions. Some of the reasons for variations of the story are that some
3. will see John as a hero and others will see John as a trickster, some will focus in on the feats as opposed to the facts.
4. Discuss with the students the reasons for the different versions of the story.

- The fact that John was a slave is an important part of the High John stories. He was seen by slaves as a hero who could not be subjugated by his master because he was smarter than his master and able to control his master by his wits more than the master was able to control him.
- 5.
 - 6.
- After the discussion choose another three students to retell the High John stories. Students should again take note of the differences. The differences should again be discussed keeping in mind the previous discussion.

There should be as many different ways of retelling the story as there are people telling the story. This is an excellent way of helping students understand that stories change from person to person according to what each person defines as important.

Sample Lesson 2

Objective:

To demonstrate to students that folktales are fashioned by the community over time and are changed and modified as time passes.

Methods:

For this lesson, students will read, organize, and dramatize one of the folktales read. For example “Reep on Stepping” from *Black Folktales* is a good place to start.

- Student groups will choose a narrator and the parts of master, missy, and the children. The
1. narrator retells the story of Dave and also acts the part of Dave. He describes the events as though they were his own memories.
- As Dave nears the end of his story, he keeps on stepping as the master tells him “Dave! The children love you. I love you, and Missy, she like you. But remember Dave! You still a nigger!”⁴
- The class will discuss the significance of what it means to “keep on stepping”. The class will
2. apply this story to a modern day situation where a person in the public eye has to “keep on stepping”.
 3. Students who do not wish to be part of the dramatization can help make small props. For example in “Keep on Stepping” they will need a boat, a hoe, and a picture of a plantation house.

Sample Lesson 3

Objective:

To help students synthesize the material covered in the class by writing an organized theme on the material covered.

1. Ask students if they know any aphorisms or proverbs. Whatever they know list on the board. After the sayings are on the board, ask the students if anyone knows what any of the sayings mean; they should give examples. This helps the student become involved in the class especially when their “sayings” are on the board.
2. Give students aphorisms from the *Book of Negro Folklore* or the *Treasury of Afro American Folklore* plantation proverbs.
3. Students choose from the aphorisms in the *Book of Negro Folklore* one quote and write short stories with the title and content suggested by the aphorisms.

Examples of the quotes that might be used are:

It’s hard to make clothes fit a miserable man. De price of your hat ain’t de measure of your brain. Buyin’ on credit is robbin’ next year’s crop. De cowbell can’t keep a secret. ⁵

4. Make copies of the best student stories excluding the titles, and hand out to the class.
5. Have students title the compositions written by their classmates.

This exercise allows the students to be creative and also to share what each person has gotten from the assignment; it serves as a reward for some and an incentive for others.

Sample Lesson 4

Objective:

To help students distinguish between fact and inferences and to analyze the organizational structure of a folk story.

1. The day before using this lesson ask students if they have ever heard of Stagolee; if they have not have them as a homework assignment ask someone either at home or in their neighborhood about a man named Stagolee. Ask them also to see if someone has ever heard the song from the fifties about Stagolee.
2. On the next class day, ask who has found out any information about Stagolee. Play the record “Stagolee” by Lloyd Price.

3. Read the “Stagolee” stories from *The Black Folktales* by Julius Lester and *The Book of Negro Folklore* by Langston Hughes.
4. List the activities that Stagolee does in the stories that probably could have happened. For example the place he was born, his way of making a living.
5. Discuss why legends have the real occurrences combined with the fantasy. Could any of the fantasy have some explanations.
Compare the recording to the stories. Which seems more logical, and what appeal does the
6. story have that the record does not? What appeal does the record have that the story does not?

Sample Lesson 5

Objective:

Help students apply the folk tradition to themselves, and understand they are part of the oral tradition.

Materials: Tape recorder, blank tapes, and records of rap music.

1. Listen to one of the rap songs.
2. Ask the students what is a rap; and what are the various components of raps; for example, repetition, beat, and ad libbing.
Students will record raps that they are already familiar with that are done by groups that do rap music. Some of the groups should be mentioned for example Grand Master Flash, Run
3. Dee MC, Sugar Hill, the Funkadelics, etc. This should not be difficult because most students have probably already memorized several raps.
4. Students will take the rhythms of their raps and rewrite the story of Stagolee to a rap rhythm; they should be reminded to keep in mind the various components of rap music.
5. Students will record the raps that they have written and share the results with the class.

This particular lesson should be done in a team or group effort. Perhaps one student to read the rap, and another to make the beat or rhythm.

Sample Lesson 6

Objective:

Students will recognize how they fit into the oral tradition.

Method:

In the *Book of Negro Folklore* there is a section on playsongs. Many of these play songs are already familiar to

the students.

1. Ask students what playsongs they did as children, and write these on the beard.
2. Ask for a volunteer to perform one of the playsongs.
3. Have students write playsongs they already know.
Students should record the playsongs of the children in their neighborhood and report back to
4. the class on how they are different from the songs they read and know and how the songs of the children are similar.
Students should record the differences and similarities. The differences need to be explained.
5. Some reasons for change might be that songs deal with more current issues or that the same songs are being done but they have been altered or modified in time.

Sample Lesson 7

Objective:

Help students with the analysis, synthesis, evaluation, and application of the stories they collect.

Method:

Once students have collected their own stories, they need a method for understanding what they have collected. This method will help students organize the material they have collected.

1. Students should fill out the work sheet on the analysis, synthesis, evaluation and application of the stories they collected.

Sample Lesson 8

Objective:

Students will recognize what are the criteria of the hero in folk legends, and apply that to a folk hero they have discussed.

Explain:

Heroes are made not born; they became legends before they die. They come to be heroes because contemporaries have come to have standards of heroic actions. "When a particular figure represents the heroic virtues for a whole people, we call him a culture hero." ⁶

Culture heroes differ from real heroes in many ways; these are:

1. Miraculous birth
2. Rapid maturation
3. Virtuous (brave, strong and intelligent)
4. Confront and overcome enemies of malevolence and power, and obstacles of insurmountable difficulty
5. Teach their peers practical and moral wisdom
6. Usually die young promising to return. ⁷

High John and StagoLee are culture heroes. Students have read the High John and the StagoLee stories.

1. They are to write the examples for each character to determine if StagoLee and John are culture heroes.

Worksheet

Analysis, Synthesis, Evaluation, and Application of Stories Collected

- I. Analysis
 1. What kind of person is the main character? (young, old, city, country, real or legendary)
 2. Can this person live in the city as well as the country?
 3. What were the facts about the person who is the main character and what inferences were made?
- II. Synthesis
 1. Categorize the factual events from the exaggerated events.
 2. Rewrite the important events of the story and revise the conclusions of these events.
- III. Application
 1. Compare the positive attributes the folk hero has to be a modern day folk hero.
 2. Compare the negative characteristics of the folk hero to the modern day folk hero.
- IV. Evaluation
 1. What important lessons might be learned from the story?
 2. How could the hero have changed the situations that he was found in.

Notes

¹ Lester, Julius, *Black Folktales* , Grove Press, p. 113-135.

² Hughes, Langston, *The Book of Negro Folklore*, p. 359-363.

³ Dorson, Richard, *American Folklore and the Historian*, p. 158-160.

⁴ Lester, pg. 153-157.

⁵ Hughes, pg. 120.

⁶ Edmonson, Munro S., *Lore An Introduction to the Science of Folklore and Literature* , p. 150.

⁷ Ibid., p. 150.

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for use in the classroom.

Student Reading List

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