Classroom Connection: Hair Ethnography as a Culturally Responsive Visual Art Lesson

_Culturally Responsive Teaching is a pedagogy that recognizes the importance of including students' cultural references in all aspects of learning._

–Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994)

Art is storytelling and through art education we organically embody the fundamental framework of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP), learning within the context of culture, student-centered instruction, culturally mediated instruction, reshaping the curriculum, and envisioning the teacher as facilitator (Ladson-Billings 1994). CRP allows our students to reach beyond the surface and connect to deeper meaning through visual storytelling. Geneva Gay, Professor of Education at the University of Washington-Seattle, states “stories are means for individuals to project and present themselves, declare what is important and valuable, give structure to perceptions, make general facts more meaningful to specific lives, connect self with others, proclaim the self as cultural being…” (Gay 2018).

HairStory is an art lesson that presents a perspective of storytelling around the positionality of hair. It was created in response to self-discovery through situating hair to connect to personal truths through exploring various media to examine the complexities of textures, movement, and meaning. From hats to headwraps to the glorious bald crown to straight, soft curls, kinks, coils, and all the textures in between, hair holds stories of culture, community, influence, and identity. This lesson is adaptable for grades 7-12 as well as community education and higher education.
HairStory: Identity, Culture, and Representation

Possible Big Ideas
Hair as Social Norms
Hair as Oppression
Hair as Celebration
Hair as Marginalization
Hair as Identity
Hair as Acceptance
Hair as Narrative

Learning Objectives
The student will (TSW):
● Discover and reimagine self through the exploration of hair
● Investigate hair as a metaphor through positionality, rites of passage, liminality, and/or self-
  hood
● Develop the ability to communicate the concept of hair as “identity”
● Increase awareness and understanding of hair through viewing and discuss works of art by
  artists who use hair as subject matter
● Create a mixed-media visual HairStory demonstrating visual concepts of storytelling that
  examine hair as “identity” through various media

BIPOC Artist Exemplars
Kenturah Davis [http://www.kenturah.com](http://www.kenturah.com)
  *Time and Place Have Had Their Say* (2019)
  *Everything That Cannot Be Known* (2019)
  *In Praise of Shadows* (2019)

Jessica Spence [www.jessicaspenceart.com](http://www.jessicaspenceart.com)
  *Tawanda* (2016)
  *Sunday Evening* (2017)
  *Laid* (2019)
  *Fro Hawked* (2016)

Lorna Simpson [https://lsimpsonstudio.com](https://lsimpsonstudio.com)
  *Stereo Styles* (1988)
  *Naturally Difficult/Released* (2017)

  *I Could* (n.d)
  *I Am* (n.d)

Rabea Ballin [www.rabeaballin.com](http://www.rabeaballin.com)
  *Philgood* (2008)
  *Coming of Age (after Ojekeire)* (2009)
  *Self Portrait* (2009)
**Materials**
Materials are choice-based. TSW explore three or more different media. Materials are to be seen as a tool to create as well as a means to tell their story. Material options include but are not limited to:

- Paint (acrylic, watercolor, gouache, tempera)
- Digital media (digital photography, Photoshop, digital drawing)
- Graphite
- Colored pencils
- Inks
- Chalk pastels
- Oil pastels
- Collage
- Relief printmaking (linoleum block or collagraph)

**Instructional Resource Guidelines**
(Based upon National Visual Arts Strands: Respond, Connect, Create, and Present)

**RESPONDING**
- View artists. Discuss the different ways hair is displayed:
  - What does the image say about hair?
  - How does the artist use hair as a method of identity and individuality?
- View vintage ads and discuss how hair tells a story through style, posture, text, and textures.

**CONNECTING**
Consider personal hair. How do you style your hair? Why do you style your hair? Do you identify with cultural connections to your hair? What is your hair routine or non-routine? Why? How do your hair and hair accessories speak to who you are, how you identify, your emotions? What do these relationships to your hair look like in a work of art? Reflect through journaling exploring different media, mark making, and thumbnails.

**CREATING**
- **Voice** How will you tell your HairStory? How will you present it to the viewer? How will the various media assist in telling your HairStory?
- **Studio** Examine, Explore, Engage, and Develop a Visual HairStory.

**PRESENTING**
Reflecting upon previous questions, identify key elements of your HairStory. Express the key elements through the connection of positionality and artistic choices.
Instructor’s (Lynnette) Exemplar
This is an example of a possible outcome based on the provided learner objectives. I created the exemplar based on my personal hair story. The piece is entitled Hairprint. I explain below how I examined each strand to create the piece.

Media Linoleum block print (fingerprints and portrait), chalk pastels, acrylic paint, alcohol markers. I purposefully selected media that I normally do not use together to work through the complex nature of my HairStory.

Identity Fingerprints, pathway stencils, and hair.

Fingerprints as Hair Fingerprints are the individual uniqueness of a person, setting us apart from everyone else. Through a pattern of whirls and lines, my fingerprints take on the pattern of the coils of the hair.

Pathway Stencil Roadmap journey of finding self

Emerge Acceptance. As the hair manifests into the fingerprints, self also emerges from the continuous journey of self-discovery.

This lesson creates space for students to express their hair culture through using mixed media. Society has for too long attempted to define our curls and coils and diminish our representation by defining beauty, from facial features to hair texture, in a negative light. This is an opportunity to share a method of teaching students how to define themselves and debunk the societal myths of African American hair.

Exemplar by Lynnette M. Gilbert, Hairprint. Mixed media (linoleum block print, acrylic paint, chalk pastels, alcohol markers). c. 2021
Lynnette M. Gilbert, EdD is an art educator from Ridgeland, MS. She received her doctorate in Curriculum and Instruction with an emphasis in Art Education from the University of Houston. She has 16 years of experience in secondary art education teaching in Memphis and Houston. She is Assistant Professor of Art Education at Arkansas Tech University and Director of the Windgate Summer Art Launch for Arkansas Educators hosted by the Arkansas Tech University Art Department. Her current research focuses on African American Women Artists-Art Educators from Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU). Her artwork reflects faith, thoughts, and personal experiences that capture the beauty, presence, and value of Black women. Her work was most recently featured in the 2021 National Alliance of Artists from Historically Black Colleges and Universities (NAAHBCU) Roots for Change Exhibition in Fayetteville, North Carolina. ORCID 0000-0002-9922-7453

Kathy J. Brown, PhD, is Assistant Professor of Art Education at the University of North Texas. Prior to pursuing doctoral studies at the University of Houston, she was an elementary and middle school art teacher for many years. Her critical, art-based, ethnographic research interests include social justice art education, anti-Blackness in education, art teacher narratives, cultural histories, and Afrofuturism as antiracist pedagogy. Current projects include a collaborative, three-part, rhizomatic self-study exploring the use of the 5E lesson-planning model in art teacher education, duoethnographic research about Black hair as CRP, an Afrofuturist/Gullah Geechee inspired fibers project, and co-leading an ongoing panel series, the 2044 Series: Anti-racist Praxis as Futurist Art and Design Pedagogy.

Works Cited


Randle, Brenda, A. 2015. I Am Not My Hair; African American Women and their Struggles with Embracing Natural Hair! Race, Gender & Class. 22.1-2:114-21


Journal of Folkllore and Education (2021: Vol. 8) Black Hair as Metaphor Explored through Duoethnography and Arts-Based Research by Kathy J. Brown and Lynnette M. Gilbert

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