

Ellen Alderton

Experiential Curriculum Design and Reflection/Justification

The Great Migration

Part I: Experiential Curriculum Design

1. Learning Goals and Model

Content Area: Social Studies, Grade Level: 5

Learning Goals: By participating in this guided-experience curriculum, students will develop an understanding of the forces and motives underlying the African-American Great Migration, and the differences between real versus hoped-for outcomes that migrants experienced. Further in-class learning will allow students to compare the impetuses and outcomes of the Great Migration to current events.

Model: The experiential components of this curriculum are based upon the learning model developed by Live It Learn It, a nonprofit organization in Washington, D.C. providing experiential learning opportunities to students in Title I schools.

2. Pre-Trip Lesson

a. General Overview

In a faux audio recording by modern artist “Jacob Lawrence,” Lawrence will explain to the class: I am a descendant of the Great Migration and I wish to create a series of paintings depicting this historic experience. Would your class please help me to identify what changes in their lives southern African-Americans may have hoped for when they chose to migrate to the North between the World Wars? Your teacher will hand out four of my paintings about conditions African-Americans experienced in the South. Based on these paintings, would you draw me a picture of what these people might have been hoping for when they moved north?

To groups of three, pass out (1) images of Jacob Lawrence panels—with Lawrence’s corresponding captions—depicting negative conditions in the South,¹ and (2) a large blank piece of paper and colored pencils. Each group of three students will receive a different assortment of the “Southern” panels. Based on its panels, each group will follow Lawrence’s instructions to: (1) predict what types of living conditions migrants would have hoped to find when they moved north, and (2) draw a single large picture depicting the group’s predictions.

¹ Images of panels with their captions from Lawrence’s *Great Migration* series can be downloaded from The Phillips Collection’s website.

b. Pre-Trip Lesson and the Experiential Learning Loop

The Live It Learn experiential learning loop is comprised of activities that allow students to:

- 1) Experience key questions and content through hands-on, inquiry-driven activities in and out of the classroom.
- 2) Analyze and make meaning of experiences by examining evidence.
- 3) Connect these experiences to the world and to themselves.

Experiential components of this lesson include: listening to an audio recording and instructions by an actor playing Jacob Lawrence; reviewing and interpreting images and captions of panels from the *Great Migration* series; and drawing a large picture depicting predictions of what lifestyles in the North the migrants might have hoped for.

In the analysis component, each group will be asked to describe the four original images their group received. The class as a whole will be asked: What do your images say about conditions for African-Americans in the South? Why would people want to move away from such conditions? What conditions might people hope to find after they've made the effort to move north? Each group will show and explain its drawing of hoped-for outcomes to the class.

Taken together, the experiential and analysis components allow students to manipulate print-outs of original artifacts, collect evidence from these print-outs, and practice higher-level thinking skills of predicting and concluding.

To connect the learning experience to students' personal experiences, ask the following questions: Are there difficult conditions in your current life in Washington, D.C.? What are some of these conditions? Are these conditions so difficult that you might want to move away when you grow up? Why or why not? Alternatively, did your family or ancestors move to Washington or the United States because of difficulties it was experiencing in another place? What are some of the good things about living in Washington? What are some of the factors that would make it hard for you to move away from your home?

3. Trip to The Phillips Collection

a. General Overview

The Phillips Collection is a private art museum located in downtown Washington, D.C. The Phillips Collection displays permanent collections, as well as touring collections, of modern art. Artists featured at the Phillips Collection include Renoir, Rothko, O'Keeffe, Van Gogh, and many impressionist works. Established in 1921, The Phillips Collection takes pride in displaying these masterpieces in an intimate setting—a modest-sized building located in a block of row houses. Young people may visit the Phillips Collection for free. Most importantly for this project, the Phillips Collection houses half of the Jacob Lawrence *Great Migration* series, and routinely opens its doors for multiple K-12 learning experiences, serving thousands of students and teachers each year.

For the field experience portion of these guided exercises, students will be handed their classroom drawings of the hopes of members of the Great Migration. They will peruse the Jacob Lawrence collection and look for panels and captions depicting the actual quality of life of

migrants in the North. Finally, they will select three panels that best capture the essence of life in the North for the migrants. They will describe the difference between migrants' possible dreams and the quality of life that migrants found when they moved north.

b. Engagement in the Learning Loop

For the experiential component of this exercise, students will have the opportunity to peruse the "post-migration" section of the *Great Migration* series. They will review the images and the painting captions to come up with conclusions about what lifestyles were actually like for people who elected to migrate north.

For the analysis component of this field-trip, students will be asked to compare their classroom drawings of what migrants hoped to find with Lawrence's paintings of the quality of life the migrants actually encountered.

In connecting the classroom experience and the field-trip experience, some students may be surprised to find that the life migrants found in the North was actually much worse than what they might have hoped for. In predicting what migrants most hoped for, students will probably have depicted circumstances such as good jobs, good education for children, social acceptance, and healthy living conditions. By contrast, Lawrence's panels depict a life in the North that belies this optimism. Certain panels feature overcrowded housing, disease, arson, rejection by established northern African-Americans, and other woes.

Further ask students if they are surprised by the differences between the migrants' dreams and the reality they found. How does the quality of life that migrants encountered in the North compare with modern-day life in Washington, D.C.? Are there ways that life in Washington, D.C. could be better? Who are different groups of people the class can think of who have immigrated at different times in history? (The class may come up with examples such as the Pilgrims and other Europeans who migrated to the New World during colonial times. They may also think of 19th and 20th Century immigrants to the United States. Current immigrant students may offer their own personal experiences. Students who are keeping up with current events may know about the Syrian refugee crisis.)

4. Curricular Extension

A curricular extension to serve as a follow-up to these two learning experiences entails an examination of the current Syrian refugee crisis. Students should be asked to look up information about the refugee crisis on the internet.² Students should download and arrange six photos in an order that tells a story about a single refugee or an entire refugee family. The six photos should include captions drafted by the students. This activity is challenging for fifth-graders, and it should be conducted in groups, with groups sharing their illustrated stories with the class.

Next ask students probing ethical and social justice questions: Do people living in bad conditions have a right to a better life, or must they simply accept the conditions they find themselves in? Who has the responsibility to help people find that better life (charities, governments, private individuals)? The class should discuss the modern concept of a "refugee" versus an "immigrant."

² Numerous resources for explaining the Syrian refugee crisis to young people are currently available on the internet. A suggested search is "Syrian refugee crisis explained for kids".

In what ways were members of the Great Migration like immigrants (economic hardship spurred them on)? In what ways were they like refugees (political persecution also spurred them on: literacy tests, segregation and lynching, for example)? Do nations have a duty to open their borders to refugees? How would taking in refugees affect a city like Washington, D.C.?

Part II. Reflection and Justification

The curriculum above is designed to target students attending Title I (low-income) schools in Washington, D.C., serving overwhelmingly students of color. Experiential learning acts as a direct antidote to the long-standing and ongoing deficits in educational experiences for low-income children. Ladson-Billings (1992), Camangian (2015), Kinloch (2012) and Haberman (1995) all describe bleak conditions in inner-city schools where students are typically neither exposed to exciting ideas nor delighted by creative and thought-provoking learning exercises.

Ladson-Billings (1992) considers the problem of “the stark contrast between the academic performance of the student of color... and the general White population” (p. 312). While her focus is on literacy education, there are lessons to be learned for other disciplines besides. She calls on classroom teaching to adopt a “culturally relevant approach” (p. 313). A strength of studying Jacob Lawrence’s work is that it explores the lives of African-Americans, who, as noted, make up a majority of the students in Title I D.C. schools. Moreover, expanding upon the Lawrence example to consider and discuss other communities forced to migrate allows all students to explore various ethnicities, including their own family histories of migration.

Ladson-Billings further calls on teachers to build “a feeling of camaraderie” (p. 317) in their classes. The experiential-learning activities presented above allow students to work together in groups, sharing their ideas and stimulating one another’s creativity.

Camangian (2015) calls for a shift from perceiving certain schools as simply “urban” to understanding them to be “dispossessed” (p. 425). The latter notion embraces the historic injustices and undemocratic practices experienced by primarily African-American students and their ancestors. It can just as well apply to the injustices many D.C.-area Latino students’ families have experienced in their countries of origin, as well as other foreign students whose families have fled war and oppression. To be “dispossessed” also echoes the life realities of the members of the Great Migration. As such, the Jacob Lawrence series, once again, provides a wonderful example of what Camangian calls “culturally responsive pedagogy” (p. 428).

Kinloch (2012) describes a year of teaching in a poor, Harlem, New York setting. Upon first engaging with her students, she finds that the overwhelming view is that their teachers do not care about them. She refers to the prevailing pedagogy as “banking education” (p. 19) whereby teachers bestow (or deposit) knowledge in a top-down fashion. Her students express to her that they feel they are not examining anything of relevance to their community.

Kinloch, too, successfully turns to culturally relevant texts to help engage her students more deeply in the learning experience. She encourages her students to think creatively and to write and present poems. In a similar vein, the drawings and graphic stories created by the students in

the curriculum in Part I above allow them to use multiple learning styles and stimulate their creativity.

Haberman offers perhaps the most detailed and structured overview of poor teaching methods when he describes a bleak and widespread “pedagogy of poverty” (p. 1) whereby students are merely controlled by their teachers and schools, and enjoy no creative or inspiring activities. He argues that urban students have been conditioned to be indifferent, lack curiosity, and even lack compassion and candor due to this pedagogy of poverty. It is my hope that the focus on the travails of members of the Great Migration, as well as the travails of Syrian refugees, will give students an opportunity to develop concern, curiosity, and empathy.

Haberman also lists a series of activities that constitute good teaching and that can take place in urban classrooms. These best practices include: involving students with issues of human differences (e.g., in the case of the curriculum above, considering different peoples who have had to migrate); presenting major concepts and big ideas and not merely focusing on isolated facts (e.g., exploring the phenomenon of the Great Migration experientially); applying ideals such as social justice (e.g., exploring the injustices that compel people to migrate); incorporating active involvement on the students’ parts (e.g., again using the experiential learning model); and relating new ideas to ideas learned previously (e.g., using the Great Migration as a launching pad to explore the Syrian refugee crisis). Haberman offers additional examples of good teaching, but I have selected these particular best practices as each of them is incorporated, to a greater or lesser extent, into the experiential curriculum outlined in Part I.

The Center for the Future of Museums (2010) reports that while 34 percent of the American population is made up of minorities, core museum visitors today are comprised of only nine percent minorities. These numbers suggest that despite the fact that D.C. public-school students live in a city teeming with museums (including many free museums), many of these schools’ students have probably never visited a museum in their lives. The experiential model allows students to transition from a pedagogy of poverty to a pedagogy of experience. One hopes that students—once delighted by the treasures awaiting them in informal learning institutions—will seek to take further advantage of the many other wonderful parks, monuments, historic sites and museums that Washington, D.C. has to offer.

References

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Live It Learn It. www.liveitlearnit.org