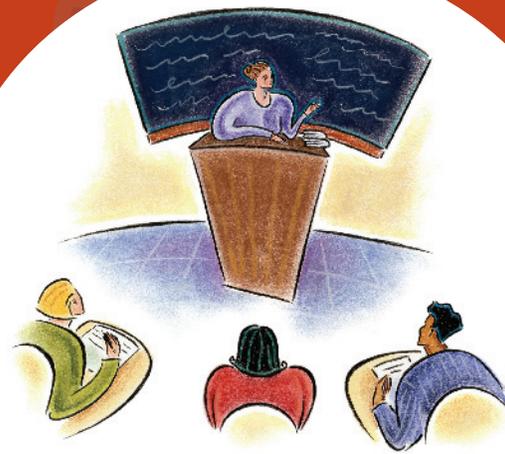


In the Classroom

Engaging African-American Students in Language Study

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According to a 2005 exploratory study conducted by Zena Moore at the University of Texas, Austin, from January 1994 to December 2003 there were only six African-American students enrolled in the UT Foreign Language Teacher Education Program out of a total of more than 300. Statistically, there should be at least three African-American students in the teaching program each year. What are the explanations for such low enrollments and what can be done to address them?

According to a study conducted by the Organization of African-American Linguists (AAL) in 2005, *Strategies for the Retention of African-American Students in World Language Programs*, “African-American students value multicultural lessons that incorporate the African diaspora.”

African-American college students wrote the following responses to the survey question: *Do you feel that having knowledge of Blacks or people of African descent would have influenced your world language study?*

“Incorporating African influences and contributions may have served to increase esteem in my ability to apprehend the language.”

“It may have fostered a sense of pride in the achievements of people of my own community. It may have caused me to aspire to greater achievements in world languages.”

“We need to look to improving the quality of instruction, particularly at the high school level and specifically for African-American students, if we are serious about increasing the presence of minority groups in the teaching profession,” said Zena Moore, chair of the ACTFL African-American Students (AAS) SIG.

Plan of Action

Focusing on pedagogy, AAL (of which I am co-founder) has taken deliberate action to incorporate the African diaspora into world language programs in North Carolina. Through interviews, conversations, and surveys, AAL found that many teachers do not include the African diaspora into their instruction due to a lack of knowledge and exposure to the information. Teachers also

reported being unsure of how to incorporate such material into demanding curricula.

In 2005, I began to collaborate with world language departments in North Carolina schools to give presentations to students and teachers on Afro-Latino cultures. I contacted local teachers by email, in which I outlined the objectives of the presentation. The purpose of the Afro-Latino presentation was twofold: 1) To educate students and teachers about the diversity of Latin America; 2) To recognize the African influences that have contributed to such diversity.

Following the presentations, teachers and students received resources for incorporating diverse instruction into their classrooms. A post-presentation survey was distributed to students and teachers.

About the Presentation

The Afro-Latino presentation begins with a slide show of African descendants throughout the world. These descendants are representative of Latin America, Afro-Francophone countries, Brazil, and several other countries. This global panorama helps to put a face to the diversity of the African diaspora. Most photographs used in the presentation were collected from various educators’ travel experiences. The purpose of this segment is to show the diverse languages spoken by African descendants along with their influences and contributions to the world.

Since the presentation is given predominantly to Spanish classes, the slide show is then narrowed to Afro-Latinos. Students are shown photographs of famous Afro-Latinos who are popular in the United States. Some of the celebrities included are reporter Soledad O’Brien, actress Zoe Saldña, actor Alfonso Ribeiro, and baseball players Mariano Rivera and Sammy Sosa.

The Caribbean is a focal point of the presentation since there is a large percentage of Afro-Latinos there (e.g., 62% Cuba, 84% Dominican Republic). Students learn through first-hand accounts of travel experiences that relate to the African diaspora, such as my recent visit to Havana, Cuba. There, I studied Afro-Cuban influences on history, poetry, music, religion, and daily life. Students listen to recordings of poetry readings by Afro-Cubans Nicolás Guillen and Nancy Morejón.

The Afro-Latino presentation also highlights the African presence in South America. I introduce Afro-Uruguay through poetry by Cristina Rodriguez Cabral. Students listen to Afro-Peruvian music by Manuel Donayre. Students also analyze literature by Afro-Puerto Rican/Dominican poet Sandra María Esteves. Finally, students explore song lyrics that incorporate the African diaspora such as Ricky Martin's song "Raza de Mil Colores [Race of a Thousand Colors]."

Steps to Diversifying Instruction

For teachers who would like to diversify their instruction by including the African diaspora, here are some suggestions:

Start with what you know.

Focus on the diversity of a country that you have visited or where you have studied abroad. Another option is to start with your community. Are there diverse populations represented? Make connections to those groups and incorporate their culture into instruction. Since 80% of the Mexican population in Winston-Salem, NC, are descendants of Afro-Mexicans from Costa Chica, Guerrero, the Afro-Latino presentations focused heavily on this population.

To acquire information and resources for lesson plans, take advantage of the Internet. The Internet can be an invaluable source of information since many countries have official websites that include their diverse heritage. You should begin to acquire a library little by little: a song here, a movie there, then a poem, later a piece of art, etc. Before you know it, you will have enough material to incorporate into your lessons. Avoid limiting lessons of diversity to a certain time of the year; instead evenly integrate diverse pedagogy throughout the entire quarter, semester, or year.

Helping One Another

Collaboration is key. Do not forget that students are wonderful resources. Include them in the research process. Allow them to query, explore, and reach their own conclusions. If the research is student-centered, the students will quickly take ownership of their education. Information that is sought after is much more meaningful than information that has been given. Several minds working together will build your library much faster.

Join professional organizations. Many organizations hold annual meetings or conferences that attract language educators with a variety of interests. There is sure to be someone with whom you can

network and from whom you can receive ideas. Often, professional organizations have special interest groups, like ACTFLs, that will facilitate networking and sharing. Professional organizations may also have databases complete with links to a plethora of Internet and print resources. In addition to organizations, network within your district. At departmental meetings, in-service trainings, or regional meetings, feel free to ask what someone else is doing in the classroom. An innovative idea may be just a conversation away.

Look for someone in your local area with expertise. Invite him/

her to do a workshop for your department or to speak to your class. Take notes on the presentation so that you are learning along with the students. Share this information with colleagues. Angie Nelson-Pico, a Spanish teacher at Bolton Elementary School in North Carolina states, "I want [my students] to realize the African influence throughout the Americas, not just the United States." Nelson-Pico appreciates the presentations for bringing "expertise of Afro-Latino influences to share with [her] fifth graders."



Professor Hines speaking at one of the presentations.

Bridging the Gap for All Students

A misconception is that multicultural lessons are solely for the benefit of minority students. To the contrary, all students deserve a diverse education. Every student benefits from exposure to cultural diversity. Regardless of one's background, all students become better equipped for a global economy as they make personal connections to the world around them.

One of the most memorable Afro-Latino presentations I gave was to the classroom of Tamara Hughes at Mount Tabor High School in the Forsyth County School District. At the end of the presentation, I asked, "Are there any questions or comments?" After a slight delay and some prompting, a brave white male student responded, "I feel like I have been learning the same history for years. Social Studies is one of my least favorite subjects. If I could learn stuff like what you are teaching, I would love Social Studies."

His comments were the foundation for the dialogue that followed. Next, a student from El Salvador responded, "Living in the United States, I do not know very much history about my country, through your presentation I learned a lot. I wish that I could learn more about my culture in school." Finally, an African-American student responded, "Although I have friends who are White and who are Hispanic, we know very little about each other's culture and history."

Resources

Websites with information related to the African diaspora and African-American retention in world language programs

ACTFL African-American Students (AAS) Special Interest Group

www.actfl.org

This SIG provides a public forum for the discussion of issues relating to African-American students and their needs as language learners.

African-American Linguists

www.oaal.org

AAL was founded in 2004 by Krishauna Hines and Tamari Jenkins to create a network that would combat persistent low enrollments of African-Americans in foreign language and teacher education programs. The mission of AAL is to promote foreign language study in the African-American community and the vision of AAL is to promote a bilingual society within the African-American community in order to prepare marketable citizens for a global economy. There is a wealth of resources here for students, educators, and the community. AAL works closely with the ACTFL AAS SIG to promote higher retention rates of African-American students.

African Diaspora

www.africanamericans.com

AfricanAmericans.com has over 750 web pages on the African-American community, covering many topics: Black history, the civil rights movement, slavery, African-American art, and Black gospel music. This site also includes profiles of famous African-American historical leaders and current black celebrities.

Africans in Mexico

www.afromexico.com/index.htm

The purpose of this website is to introduce readers to the culture and unique experience of Mexicans of African descent.

Caribbean Cultural Center

www.caribecenter.org

The mission of Caribbean Cultural Center is to identify, compile, and disseminate information on the creative expressions and rich cultural contributions of people of African descent internationally.

Center for Afro-Cuban Studies

www.afrocubaweb.com

This site offers over 700 pages of information on Afro-Cuban influences and contributions.

College Language Association

www.clascholars.org

The mission of the College Language Association is to foster high professional standards for teachers of language and literature and to promote productive scholarship among its members. The College Language Association, founded in 1937 by a group of Black scholars and educators, is an organization of college teachers of English and foreign languages which serves the academic, scholarly, and professional interests of its members and the collegiate communities they represent.

If we listen to students' voices, which represent multiple cultural groups, they are speaking the same language. If we feel that education is a partnership of sharing and facilitation, then we must take heed to our students. They long to know more about one another. Educators must create the conditions for students to experience diverse instruction.

Reflection

Because I received wonderful feedback from my students at Salem College about the diversity that I incorporated into my lessons, I was encouraged to share my research, lesson plans, and resources with other students and teachers. This was the reason I decided to give presentations on Afro-Latinos to as many classrooms that would allow me to visit. I believe in promoting best practices at all levels, so I visited various classrooms—from fifth graders to graduate students. Although I still continue to give the Afro-Latino presentation, within the first three months, I had already visited over a dozen classrooms. I adapted the presentation as I went along depending on the level and the needs of the school. Teachers and students alike were welcoming and highly engaged in the presentations.

Angie Nelson-Pico wrote, "Thanks for a wonderful presentation. The kids loved you. It was easy to see the way they crowded around you at the end and reacted during the presentation. Thanks for making a positive impact on their day. I guarantee that you made an impression that some will carry with them always, not just today. That is one of the best benefits of being a teacher." Velvet McGregor at Cook Elementary School in North Carolina stated, "The Spanish teacher and I both commented on how well behaved and interested the kids were in their Spanish lesson after having seen your presentation."

Feedback such as this from students and teachers have motivated AAL and the ACTFL AAS SIG to create strategic plans to increase enrollment in foreign language programs. We believe that although there are multiple factors that affect African-American retention rates, curriculum and instruction reform are essential components to combating this issue.

Author Credit to Come.