

Lift every voice

1. Introduction. This is presented as an illustration project anchored in observation of Black History Month. (For general background on the development of Black History month, see <http://www.history.com/topics/black-history-month>. For other resources, see <http://www.africanamericanhistorymonth.gov/>.)

Introductory discussion also focuses on illustration - both as a kind of work that artists can do, and as a tool for getting a point across. Ask: How do you visualize (the future, work, important events?) Ask: When you graduate, what do you get? (Name degrees). Ask: What jobs can you get with a degree? (This is a way to visualize different kinds of work that artists do. Then zero in on illustration.)

This is a task in illustration, defined as “developing images to go with texts and concept.” The class discusses what this can mean. For example, “Do a verbal illustration of FACTS mealtime ritual.” (Using a verse that reinforces school values and that is collectively known and familiar to all students). How would you illustrate the words “sun,” “rain,” “circle.” What is easy to illustrate? Introduce strategies – the idea of doing sequential images, or using the idea of montage. The class creates an image collection and explores these strategies, using examples of a music poster and introducing scale, composition and overlapping.

2. Contextualizing “Lift Every Voice.” Explaining that the mealtime ritual song is part of the school repertoire, the teacher asks about other songs that are widely shared and leads class discussion: What is an anthem? A national anthem? (What is a nation?) What is the Black national anthem? The teacher shares a Melba Moore recording of “Lift Every Voice” in which Jesse Jackson sets the historical context of the song. (See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EOP6kgkbSu8>. The teacher shares an explanation about Jackson and who he is. . .in the context of the recent election, many kids knew this.)

Then, the teacher leads a discussion about folk arts. Who did people learn this song from? Discussion of the importance of people holding on to this song, over time. Stories about how schools and kids and churches have held onto this song over time.

3. Art-making. “Lift Every Voice” is sliced up into stanzas— literally— with stanzas in a hat. (See http://www.naacp.org/about/history/levas_history/index.htm). Kids pull a stanza out of the hat and begin to talk about how they will illustrate their stanza. Discuss what is easy to illustrate and what is more difficult. What are strategies that you can use to illustrate each section. What are symbols that you can use to organize the composition?

Technical matters are explained and demonstrated: solid images, cutting paper approaches, generating a line, image, text and decorative components. Consideration of design vocabulary. Folk arts residency artist Linda Goss wears clothing with African designs and patterns, and students consider how to use West African design components to make the point they want to make. Discussion of Reverend Joseph Lowery’s talk at

President Obama's inauguration helped students think about how to "name the dark past," and how to illustrate "the hope" of the future.

Other resources:

Kim Weston sings "Lift" in 1972 in LA, introduced by Jackson, with historic clips:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nGWsqR6UbGk>

Julian Bond. *Lift Every Voice and Sing: A Celebration of the Negro National Anthem 100 Years, 100 Voices*. Random House ebook, 2001. For origin narrative by Johnson and commentaries by others: "A group of young men in Jacksonville, Florida, arranged to celebrate Lincoln's birthday in 1900. My brother, J. Rosamond Johnson, and I decided to write a song to be sung at the exercise. I wrote the words and he wrote the music. Our New York publisher, Edward B. Marks, made mimeographed copies for us and the song was taught to and sung by a chorus of five hundred colored school children. "Shortly afterwards my brother and I moved from Jacksonville to New York, and the song passed out of our minds. But the school children of Jacksonville kept singing it, they went off to other schools and sang it, they became teachers and taught it to other children. Within twenty years it was being sung over the South and in some other parts of the country. Today, the song, popularly known as the Negro National Hymn, is quite generally used. "The lines of this song repay me in elation, almost of exquisite anguish, whenever I hear them sung by Negro children." —James Weldon Johnson, 1935
(<http://www.powells.com/biblio?PID=26314&cgi=biblio&inkey=92-0375506462-0&PID=26314>)

Lift Every Voice: Music in American Life (University of Virginia exhibition, 2001):
<http://www2.lib.virginia.edu/exhibits/music/index.html>

Reverend Joseph Lowery's benediction at President Obama's inauguration (reference to "Lift every voice"):
http://www.democracynow.org/2009/1/21/civil_rights_icon_rev_joseph_lowery