

Learning AdvantAge

Lesson Plan: Achebe's "Dead Man's Path"

Overview

Using the text of Chinue Achebe's short story "Dead Man's Path," students catalog and critically examine the use and connotative context of age-based words. A pre-test and a post-test assess the attainment of the lesson's primary objective.

Objectives

Primary Objective:

Students develop their understanding of how *age* can be conceptualized as an embodied identity category, similar to race, gender, sexual orientation, and many others.

With this exercise, students

- Read and discuss a literary text
- Learn about the author's biography and the cultural context of textual production
- Find words that have denotative and connotative value
- Critically consider when a particular age is associated with a positive value versus a negative value and why that association happens, performing an aging studies analysis
- Develop an understanding of how *age* can be conceptualized as an embodied identity category, similar to race, gender, sexual orientation, and many others

Using this framework in future lessons can lead students to

- Develop an understanding of the valuations of age, aging, and old age, which includes a basic understanding of normative age and the "othering" of non-normative ages
- Analyze associations between age-related stereotypes and social values
- Improve their awareness of their own beliefs about age, aging, and old age
- Consider how aging studies concepts intersect with other aspects of their studies
- Increase their ability to respond appropriately and respectfully to people across the age spectrum, including in workplace environments

Time

One class meeting (45 – 85 minutes), plus time for the pre-test and the post-test.

Ideally, students take the pre-test toward the beginning of the term, this lesson plan is deployed during the semester, and students take the post-test toward the end of the term, to minimize the interactive effects among the tests and the lesson.

Resources Needed

Required: Student access to computers and the internet to take the pre-test and the post-test
A paper or electronic version of "Dead Man's Path" on which students may write

Suggested: A chalkboard, whiteboard, or smartboard to make lists visible to the whole class, access to the internet, and the equipment necessary to display websites

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Preparation

** Students should complete the [pre-test](#) before this lesson.

Ideally, students will have read the story before the start of class. The story is short enough that having students read the story during class is possible.

Some instructors may wish to complete Lesson Plan Step 1 before students read the story.

Lesson Plan

1. Tell students enough of the biographical and cultural context of Chinue Achebe's childhood that students better understand the centrality of cross-cultural intersections in "Dead Man's Path." A useful reference source: www.kirjasto.sci.fi/achebe.htm.
2. Each student should have a paper or electronic version of the story on which they can mark.
3. Lead the class in a discussion of how the text presents cross-cultural interactions to its readers. For example, students could focus on some or all of the following:
 - a. How the school grounds changed between Mr. Obi's arrival and the end of the story
 - b. Compare and contrast the beliefs of Mr. Obi and the villagers
 - c. Compare and contrast the characters of Mr. Obi and the village priest
 - d. Explore the beliefs, meanings, and rituals the villagers have about people's spirits
 - e. Consider the origins of the plants and sayings that Mrs. Obi prefers
 - f. Discuss the scenes of growth and the scenes of destruction.
4. Redirect students' attention to the elements of cross-cultural interactions. Have students consider the details of what the story suggests is an unhealthy cross-cultural interaction, then have them extrapolate from those considerations to develop a working thesis about what the story suggests could be a more healthy and useful way for cultures to intersect.
5. Have students consider if and how a person's identification with particular categories (e.g., race, class, and gender) work in this text. Students should support their assertions with references to specific phrases in the text.
6. Ask them to perform a similar analysis with age, supporting assertions with details of the text.
7. Ask students to consider the first three paragraphs of the story closely, rereading those paragraphs and marking up the text to show four groups of words: (1) words that denote youth, newness, and up-to-date ideas; (2) words that denote oldness or out-of-date ideas; (3) words that have positive connotations; and (4) words that have negative connotations. Appendix III is a screen-ready mark-up of the text.
8. Lead a discussion about the ways in which those groups of words and ideas work in the opening of this story. Suggested topics:
 - a. What are the stereotypical connections among those groups of words?
 - b. In this story, which culture is initially associated with the young/positive words and which culture is initially associated with the old/negative ones?
 - c. The story's beginning conforms to initial associations. Where are those connections first broken? (Answer: in the third paragraph, with the word *infected*.)
 - d. After that breaking point, are there consistent associations that connect a particular age with both a particular culture and a particular level of cultural value?
 - e. How do those associations, or their lack, help you refine or further support your working thesis? In other words, how does the critical framework of aging studies contribute to your understanding of the text?
 - f. How might the critical framework of aging studies apply to another course text?
9. Administer the [post-test](#).

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Assessment

The instructor should administer the [pre-test](#) and [post-test](#) to assess student learning.

Additional Aging Studies Tests

Tests of Attitudes and Stereotypes about Aging and Old Age

Implicit Association Test: <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/demo/selectatest.html>

Measures subconscious stereotypes. There are IATs for many variables; *age* is one of them.
Polizzi, Kenneth G. "Assessing Attitudes Toward the Elderly: Polizzi's Refined Version of the Aging Semantic Differential." *Educational Gerontology* 29.3 (Mar. 2003): 197-216.

Tests of Facts about Aging and Old Age

Facts on Aging Quiz: <http://cas.umkc.edu/agingstudies/AgingFactsQuiz.asp>

Facts (and Myths) on Aging Quiz: <http://www.egyptianaaa.org/EducationAgingQuiz.htm>

Sokolovsky's Comparative Gerontology Quiz: <http://stpete.usf.edu/~jsokolov/quiz.htm>

Some Facts Related to the Aging Process T/F Quiz: <http://www-distance.syr.edu/agefact1.html>

Life Expectancy Calculators

Living to 100 Life Expectancy Calculator: <http://www.livingto100.com/>

The Longevity Game: <http://www.northwesternmutual.com/learning-center/the-longevity-game.aspx>

Additional Resources

www.AgingStudies.org: website includes suggested readings, syllabi for humanities-based aging studies classes, and links to other websites.

Chinua Achebe "Dead Man's Path"

 = young/new/contemporary  = old/outdated
 = positive connotations  = negative connotations

Michael Obi's hopes were fulfilled much **earlier** than he had expected. He was appointed headmaster of Ndume Central School in January 1949. It had always been an unprogressive school, so the Mission authorities decided to send a **young** and **energetic** man to run it. Obi accepted this responsibility with **enthusiasm**. He had many **wonderful** ideas and this was an opportunity to put them into practice. He had had sound secondary school education which designated him a "pivotal teacher" in the official records and set him apart from the other headmasters in the mission field. He was **outspoken** in his **condemnation** of the **narrow** views of these **older** and often **less-educated ones**.

"We shall make a good job of it, shan't we?" he asked his **young** wife when they **first** heard the **joyful** news of his promotion.

"We shall do our best," she replied. "We shall have such beautiful gardens and everything will be just **modern** and **delightful**..." In their two years of married life she had become completely **infected** by his **passion** for "**modern** methods" and his **denigration** of "these **old** and **superannuated** people in the teaching field who would be better employed as traders in the Onitsha market." She began to see herself already as the **admired** wife of the **young** headmaster, the queen of the school. The wives of the other teachers would **envy** her position. She would set the **fashion** in everything... Then, suddenly, it occurred to her that there might not be other wives. **Wavering** between **hope** and **fear**, she asked her husband, looking **anxiously** at him.