Introduction to the Amistad Curriculum

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The educators who designed the curriculum for the Illinois Amistad Commission intended to create an African-centered curriculum based in the history, perceptions, and realities of African people no matter where they were born. This approach to teaching and learning is necessarily interdisciplinary, as we cannot fully address the experiences of African people via history alone. We must also examine math, music, science, art, literature, and technology, to name a few. To guide us in our attempt at such a comprehensive curriculum, we choose to use the scholarship of Dr. Agyei Akoto. Akoto has written the seminal work in the field, a book entitled *Nationbuilding: Theory and Practice in Afrikan Centered Education*. Following his lead, we identified several key areas to address in order to create a curriculum that is truly African-centered: cultural/ideological aspects, spiritual and psycho-affective aspects, sociopolitical and economic aspects, technology, and the practical applications of nation-building.

The entire curriculum was designed to address culture and ideology. For example, the specific language of the Amistad Bill requires educators to focus on the transatlantic slave trade and its political, social, and economic ramifications in North America. To remain true to the ideals of African-centeredness, however, we chose to begin the Amistad Curriculum in Classic Africa—that is, Africa before 1500. It is in this Africa that we find the true origin of mathematics, architecture that still astounds the world, and African seafarers who bring civilization to various parts of the world, including the Americas. Finally, it is in Classic Africa that we find evidence of African people’s long-standing love of scholarship. In ancient Timbuktu, we find families who have for thousands of years collected, copied, and created hundreds of thousands of manuscripts that contain information on everything from astronomy to current events.

To reinforce the beauty and centrality of Classic Africa, we have included words and an activity based on Metu Neter (which means “divine speech”), a Classic African language and one of the oldest spoken and written scripts in the African experience. It is often called Egyptian hieroglyphs. In Metu Neter, the word for “educate” is written and pronounced as follows:

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It was also necessary to begin our journey in Classic Africa so that we might introduce African People to the world as a people fully capable of governing their own affairs and intellectually evolving their own population. As educators, we contend that Africans should not be defined by their period of enslavement, just as various European and Asian peoples are not defined by the periods of their enslavement, although those periods certainly exist in their histories. We wrote this curriculum with the unapologetic acknowledgment that *African people are the parent people of all humanity, and African civilization is the parent civilization of world civilization*. This is Africa’s enduring legacy on the planet. This is how Africa should be introduced and memorialized.

This curriculum is also unique in that it examines the sociopolitical and economic consequences that resulted from nearly 250 years of enslavement in North America. The film *Traces of the Trade: A Story from the Deep North* is featured in multiple lessons to contextualize how the enslavement of African People was essential to establishing the systemic wealth that the United States continues to enjoy.
Technology is woven into each lesson. As the designers of this curriculum, we strove to include math, science, history, and online work in each lesson. Teachers can of course feel free to add to what we have supplied here as long as the concepts and activities remain within our stated theoretical framework.

Each lesson includes activities that serve as assessment tools. As a final assessment for the entire curriculum, we are asking teachers to lead students in a practical application of nation-building—a community-based service-learning project. The specifics of the project should be decided by teachers, students, and parents working together. The only criterion that the Amistad Curriculum imposes is that the project should address the needs of an underserved population in the immediate community. Some good ideas are organizing a coat or food drive, having a teach-in for the community based on the lessons from this curriculum, or putting on a performance for the elderly at a retirement home. Students should be involved in age-appropriate activities at every level of the project. This includes identification of possible resources, creating a time line, and delegating and fulfilling responsibilities. Our hope is that the project will move students beyond any learned helplessness to activism that benefits the community in a meaningful way.

A Word on Pedagogy

As all teachers know, when the teacher and the classroom environment reflect the ideas that are being taught, the lesson has far more effect. The designers of the Amistad Curriculum encourage teachers using this tool to look in teacher’s stores and on online sites for explicit expressions of the African experience that can be brought into the classroom. Good ideas include artwork by various African American artists, colorful African American timelines, books, posters, and African fabrics and art pieces. Finding these items may require some careful searching, but we believe they will add invaluable depth to the lessons. The teachers themselves, if they choose, can wear African garments, which will grab the attention of students regardless of their race.

We encourage teachers to refrain from using this curriculum in a drill-and-kill or teach-to-pass-the-test fashion. This curriculum requires teachers to teach in a more relaxed fashion that allows for the acknowledgement of the emotions that students will feel as they learn this information. Teachers should listen and be contemplative in their response to the student’s queries. Repeat the information as often as is necessary for students to absorb it. Allow students to share ideas or revelations that pop into their minds. Smile and show interest in what students have to share. All of this will add to the learning experience and ultimately call forth a greater humanity in teachers and students.

Finally, our hope is that this curriculum attains the ideals articulated by Agyei Akoto that “well constructed curriculum benefits not only students but families and adds social value to all community.”