

Creativity in Preserving Cultural Tradition

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OVERVIEW



Video Clips

Creativity in Preserving Cultural Tradition

Objectives:

Students will:

- review perspectives on creativity as it applies to preserving cultural tradition
- reflect on their own beliefs about cultural tradition
- recognize the power of words, images and sound to influence a target audience
- analyze diverse storytelling techniques to convey messages

Vocabulary:

Otha Turner, cane flute, fife and drum, Arthur S. Alberts, Alan Lomax, polyrhythm, Okinawa, bonsai, Santa Clara pueblo, Tafoya family, kiva, Maori, Paikea

Media



Feel Like Going Home
(2:49)



Karate Kid
(2:59)



Legacy of Generations
(3:53)



Whale Rider
(2:22)

Materials Needed:

- Six page *Discussion Guide*
- Four video clips (access online or via Preserving Cultural Tradition digital media folder)
- *Student Reading* on Preserving Cultural Traditions (a copy for each student)
- *Student Handout* (a copy for each student)

Time

Approximately 50 minutes

Process:

The *Student Reading* should be given out beforehand for students to read prior to class (or during class). Introduction (background) material in the *Discussion Guide* can be summarized for the students prior to viewing the video clips, and students can complete the *Student Handouts* during or after each clip (individually or in pairs). The *Questions & Possible Answers* are designed to facilitate leading the decoding of the film clips, while *Further Questions* and *Summary Explorations* can be used to discuss the power of film to communicate messages, and to deepen the students' understanding of creativity in the context of preserving cultural traditions.

DISCUSSION GUIDE



Video Clips

Theme: Preserving Cultural Tradition

Before Class: Review information in the *Overview* to the *Creativity and Aging* kit; make copies of the Student Reading (one per student) and Handout (number will vary depending on the process used – see below).

Student Reading: Assign to be read for that day's class (or have them read it in class before introducing the film clips); you may want to recap or discuss some of the main points prior to the film decoding and/or incorporate some of the information into the film discussion and further questions.

Presentation Introduction

This discussion uses the desire to preserve cultural traditions as a means to explore creativity in aging. It explores a variety of cultural traditions (fife and drum playing, bonsai tree pruning, pottery and oral history) from diverse geographic locations (Mississippi, West Africa, Okinawa, Santa Clara pueblo and New Zealand).

After you view each excerpt you will be answering some questions on a handout that ask you to reflect on the messages related to creativity and aging and on the filmmaking techniques used to convey these messages. In most cases the film excerpts that you will see are part of longer productions by different filmmakers. They are not meant to show the full story as told in the much longer works from which they are taken.

Student Handout: Students can complete the handouts individually or work together in pairs. There should be one handout for each film clip shown.

Film Clips: Read the brief introduction to each film excerpt and then play the clip; provide enough time for students to write out answers to the questions and then lead a discussion using the *Media Sample Questions & Answers* guide. Probe for a range of answers, asking students to give specific evidence from each clip to back up their answers (see *Tips for Decoding* in the Resources section of this kit). *Options:* lead discussion without having students complete handouts; show all four film clips with students writing responses, then lead discussion.



Feel Like Going Home

Film 1 Introduction



This excerpt is from the 2003 documentary film *Feel Like Going Home* directed by Martin Scorsese as part of the PBS series, *The Blues*. Scorsese's film traces the roots of the blues from the Mississippi delta back to its homeland in West Africa. The two men on the porch at the beginning of the clip are musicians Otha Turner and Corey Harris.

Media Sample Questions & Answers

1) What cultural traditions are represented and by whom are they preserved?

Possible Answers: The African fife and drum has been preserved by Otha Turner and his daughter, by generations of African drummers and fife players passing along the rhythms and by the archivists who recorded the music.

2) What creative ways have the elders used to preserve tradition?

Possible Answers: The elders during the days of slavery substituted other instruments for the banned drum. Their descendants have maintained African polyrhythms as an important means toward cultural survival in the face of centuries of oppression of people of African descent.

3) What creative choices has the filmmaker made in his storytelling?
(Consider techniques in filming, scripting, & soundtrack.)

Possible Answers: He begins the story in Mississippi and then moves back to Africa with an image of Otha in his garden morphing into an African delta followed by archival stills of African musicians. The soundtrack of African fife and drum as played in both Mississippi and Africa accompanied with voice over explanation tie the two places together.

FURTHER QUESTIONS

- » How does the title of this segment, *Feel Like Going Home*, relate to the theme of preserving cultural traditions?
- » What risks did people take to preserve the tradition of African drumming and why would people elect to take such risks?
- » Describe an elder you have known who has chosen to pass along cultural traditions.



Karate Kid

Film 2 Introduction



This excerpt is from the 1984 feature film *Karate Kid* directed by John Avildsen. It stars Ralph Macchio as Daniel and Pat Morita as Mr. Miyagi. In this scene Daniel comes to thank Mr. Miyagi for fixing his bicycle.

Media Sample Questions & Answers

1) What cultural traditions are represented and by whom are they preserved?

Possible Answers: The Okinawan art of pruning bonsai trees has been sustained by Mr. Miyagi and his father who taught him the practice.

2) What creative ways has Mr. Miyagi used to preserve tradition?

Possible Answers: Rather than explaining “how to do it” he invites Daniel to practice pruning one of his trees with slight direction, using a closed eyes visioning technique to help Daniel relax and focus his mind on the task.

3) What creative choices have the filmmakers made in their storytelling?
(Consider techniques in filming, scripting, & soundtrack.)

Possible Answers: The filmmakers use a sustained silence between the actors accompanied by a flute soundtrack and the sound of the scissors snipping as they prune to convey the meditative and peaceful advice that Mr. Miyagi has given with the instruction: “Trust. Concentrate. Think only tree. Make a perfect picture down to last pine needle. Wipe your mind clean. Everything but the tree.”

FURTHER QUESTIONS

- » How does Mr. Miyagi put Daniel at ease?
- » What are the creative ways Mr. Miyagi uses to describe the origin of this cultural tradition?
- » Do you know elders who use their hands and mental discipline and concentration to preserve tradition?



Legacy of Generations

Film 3 Introduction



This excerpt is from the 1998 PBS documentary *Legacy of Generations: Pottery by American Indian Women* directed by Linda Lewett. The section you will see focuses on four generations of the Tafoya family of Santa Clara Pueblo.

Media Sample Questions & Answers

1) What cultural traditions are represented and by whom are they preserved?

Possible Answers: The Tafoya women preserve the tradition of Santa Clara pottery and tribal symbols.

2) What creative ways have the Tafoya women used to preserve tradition?

Possible Answers: Margaret describes how she talks to the clay to “make it stand up.” Luann describes how her mother taught her to use symbols within her pottery design to pass on tribal identity. She invites her granddaughter to sit with her as they work the clay side by side.

3) What creative choices has the filmmaker made in their storytelling?
(Consider techniques in filming, scripting, & soundtrack.)

Possible Answers: She emphasizes the centrality of home and place by showing four generations of Tafoya women working and speaking in their homes and studios. Their stories of learning from their elders and the images of their pots show how their work is influenced by the previous generation while maintaining individual expression.

FURTHER QUESTIONS

- » Discuss the tension between learning to reproduce the techniques and symbols of previous generations while cultivating personal creativity.
- » What cultural traditions have been passed down by the elders in your family and community, and how have they communicated their legacy of generations?
- » What does Margaret Tafoya mean when she says that she asks “my heavenly spirit to help me?”



Whale Rider

Film 4 Introduction



This excerpt is from the 2003 feature film *Whale Rider*, directed by Niki Caro and starring Keisha Castle-Hughes as Paikea and Rawiri Paratene as her grandfather Koro (or Paka as she calls him). In this scene Paikea asks her grandfather about their Maori heritage and their common ancestor, Paikea, for whom she is named.

Media Sample Questions & Answers

1) What cultural traditions are represented and by whom are they preserved?

Possible Answers: The tradition of passing along ancestral stories and lineage is preserved by the grandfather and by Paikea.

2) What creative ways has Koro used to preserve tradition?

Possible Answers: He improvises a metaphor, using the rope as a means to explain how the Maori “weave together the threads of Paikea so that our line remains strong.”

**3) What creative choices has the filmmaker made in her storytelling?
(Consider techniques in filming, scripting, & soundtrack.)**

Possible Answers: The filmmaker uses this scene to demonstrate how cultural preservation is carried on generation to generation despite apparent breaks in the thread. By writing this scene she both gives the elder an opportunity to explain that “Each one of those threads is one of your ancestors, all joined together and strong” and to demonstrate how the next generation, represented by Paikea, is able to keep the rope strong as she mends the threads and makes the motor run.

FURTHER QUESTIONS

- » What techniques in filming and soundtrack does the director use to underscore the symbolic importance of Paikea’s ability to repair the thread and start the motor?
- » What choices in scripting, location and props has the director made in order to highlight the ocean as a central foundation for Maori heritage and tradition?
- » Who are the elders who have passed along cultural heritage and family ancestral knowledge in your family or community?

SUMMARY EXPLORATIONS

- » **Reflect on the demonstrations of creativity you have seen. Which creative expressions do you most relate to? Why?**
- » **Consider the differences between the documentary films and the feature films. Which of the audio and visual storytelling techniques were most effective? Why?**
- » **What elders came to mind repeatedly as you reflected on these film excerpts? Were they acquaintances or famous figures?**
- » **How might this exploration of creativity in preserving cultural tradition help further your own relationships with elders?**
- » **Discuss the role that gender plays in how cultural traditions get preserved.**
- » **What media other than film can be a way to illustrate elders' creativity in cultural transmission and preservation?**
- » **What other films can you think of which portray elders using creativity to further the continuation of culture?**

Creativity in Preserving Cultural Traditions

Background Reading

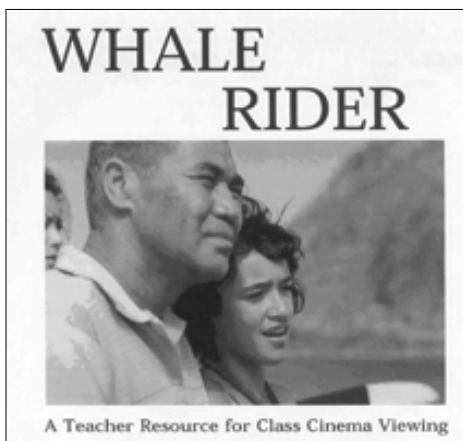
Elders as Creative Culture Keepers

Weave together the threads of Paikea so that our line remains strong. Each one of those threads is one of your ancestors...all joined together and strong all the way back to that whale of yours.

- Grandfather to Paikea
in *Whale Rider*

In most international films aging in place has a set of positive connotations. The old play a vital role in their communities. They are valued as "elders." They are repositories of stories, memories, rituals, and traditions. They know the old ways. They love the land, and they are committed to maintaining their connections to the land. Along the way they have struggled to maintain a sense of "community," drawn the young to them, functioned as mentors, and passed on their values to future generations.

- Robert Yahnke
Heroes of Their Own Stories



What messages about intergenerational engagement are communicated in this teacher guide cover?

The process of cultural preservation which occurs when elders pass along traditional knowledge to younger generations is a reciprocal one that benefits both older and younger participants. In *The Creative Age* and *The Mature Mind: The Positive Power of the Aging Brain*, Gene Cohen argued that an elder's desire to pass along wisdom arises from a need to "sum up" one's own life experience in the third phase of life. In so doing elders initiate a highly creative process and become "keepers of the culture." He gave as an example *Washington Post* publisher Katherine Graham who won a Pulitzer Prize for her first book, the memoir, *Personal History*, which she wrote at age 79 (Cohen, 2005).

Elders' stories also serve an essential purpose in maintaining the integrity of family and culture. In the Iroquois tradition chiefs are required to consider the impact of their decisions on the seventh generation in the future. This awareness is carried forward through the tradition of oral history which assures that new generations will have "seventh generation consciousness" in their minds as they eventually take on the role of tribal elders.

In a 2008 article in the periodical *Monograph* entitled "Creativity Matters: Arts and Aging in America" authors Gay Hanna and Susan Perlstein suggested that:

Creativity strengthens morale in later life, enhances physical health, and enriches relationships. It also constitutes the greatest legacy people can leave to their children, grandchildren, and society as a whole since, historically, elders have functioned as keepers of the culture who pass on the history and values of a community to the next generation. (Hanna & Perlstein, 2008, p. 3)

Generational Collaboration to Preserve Cultural Tradition

Older adults have often found creative pathways to pass along cultural traditions. In many societies the spoken word has become the torch that passes light from one generation to the next. Throughout most of human history on the planet this cultural transmission took place at ritual events as families gathered together to strengthen security and community. In the 21st century this storytelling makes use of new media technology to carry traditional stories forward.

One example of this is RadioKids, a Hawaiian program which encourages young people to interview and record their elders using the traditional “talk story” means to pass along wisdom and culture. These recorded interviews are then offered as online radio programs and podcast archives which give young people the chance to learn media skills while participating in the traditional practice of cultural transmission.



What do the title and cover of this DVD tell you about how Native American pottery forms are preserved?

In a 2007 article in the online journal *Edutopia* author Katie Klinger concluded:

This transmittal of intergenerational Hawaiian wisdom will empower students with an awareness of their place as leaders and future custodians of sacred knowledge within the Hawaiian Islands. It will provide them with vital instructions from their elders to be caretakers of the oceans and natural resources -- for we must remember that if we lose the oceans, we lose the planet. And, most importantly, it will instill a sense of pride in these Hawaiian students that the *aloha* contained within community memories is not just a word; it is a spirit of life. (Klinger, 2007, para. 8)

Increasingly film has become a vehicle for transmitting cultural wealth. In 2003 Director Martin Scorsese was executive producer of *The Blues*, a series of seven films by world famous directors cataloguing the spread of blues music from Africa to Europe and North America. In 1990 Scorsese participated in another effort to preserve and document a precious cultural form when he joined in founding The Film Foundation, a not-for-profit organization devoted to preserving U.S. cinematic heritage. As president of The Film Foundation Scorsese said: "Film is history. With every foot of film lost, we lose a link to our culture, to the world around us, to each other, and to ourselves" (Scorsese, M. (n.d.). The Film Foundation Homepage).

The Foundation's goals are to create an understanding of the social and cultural significance of film and to help young people to better understand and interpret the language of film and visual images. These goals of the Film Foundation are parallel with the goals of this curriculum. Both are dedicated to questioning the role that creativity plays in the cinematic portrayal of elders as they work to preserve culture.

NAME _____

DATE _____

Title of Film Clip: _____

- 
- PROJECT
LOOK
SHARP

