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"What if what I want to say is not enough for what I have to say?" Expanding Meaning-Making Opportunities by Using Adinkra Symbols and Yoruba Proverbs

Mellissa Gyimah-Concepcion & Olabisi Kehinde Adenekan

Abstract: As University literacy professors of West African descent, we utilise our trans-linguistic mix of practices for meaning-making opportunities, especially as we sometimes face situations where English words are insufficient in conveying our intended meaning. This paper, grounded in African-centred theory and semiotics theory, presents the use of Adinkra symbols and Yoruba proverbs to facilitate instruction, dialogic exchanges, and provide feedback. This widens the angles of literacy, centres our Africanness and broadens our students' literacy worldview. Having grown up and being steeped in these other linguistic repertoires as we are, we found that utilising a trans-linguistic mix of praxis using Adinkra symbols and Yoruba proverbs helps us to (1) articulately and accurately express ourselves when it comes to dialogic interaction and feedback, (2) build on meaning-making practices and broaden discussion in dialogic exchanges, (3) provide our students with another linguistic worldview that goes beyond the Eurocentric meaning-making experience and language use, and to (4) serve to illuminate our cultural practices while simultaneously documenting our linguistic heritage for historical preservation.

Keywords: Adinkra symbols, Black immigrant educators, Dialogism, Semiotics, Yoruba proverbs

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As professors of West African descent teaching English literacy in American Universities, we are sometimes faced with the internal battle to clearly articulate our thoughts in English. We are acutely aware that concepts can be more succinctly or profoundly expressed in our respective languages or symbols, and therefore, possibly resonating more deeply with us. Oftentimes— intentionally or otherwise— our Africanness exists on the periphery, and is not centred in the classroom, but it should be (Oppong-Wadie, 2020). We should feel confident to bring the complexities of who we are into what we do in our classrooms. Thus, with this in mind, this article is not intended as a research study, but instead as a reflective explication of our experiences, for other classroom teachers and teachers' educators to share and journey along through with us.

Steeped in other linguistic repertoires as we are, we opt to utilise a trans-linguistic mix of praxis using Adinkra symbols and Yoruba proverbs to (1) authentically express ourselves in teaching, dialogic interactions, and feedback, (2) build on meaning-making literacy practices and broaden dialogic discussions, and (3) illuminate our cultural practices while providing our students with another linguistic worldview that goes beyond the Eurocentric meaning-making experience and language use. Additionally, we invoke our cultural heritage, linguistic practices, and ways of thinking, knowing, and doing when teaching (Louis et al., 2017; Smith, 2018) so as to eschew and resist the narrow, potentially insular stories and understanding regarding Black people across the diaspora. Based on these experiences, not only do we have the deep desire to honor our students' lived experiences and the funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992; Riojas-Cortez, 2001) they bring into the classroom, but we also seek to introduce them to making meaning in ways that are authentic to our lived experiences and our ways of knowledge production.

Therefore, we feel the deep need to incorporate the complexities and realities (Mazama, 2002) of our literacy experiences into our teaching to embrace who we are and to explore how this impacts meaning-making possibilities for our students. This revelation came to the fore during the pandemic, as this unprecedented time presented us with unique experiences—while it threw everything into chaos, it also simultaneously unveiled boundless opportunities (Aristovnik et al., 2020). Like everyone else, our pedagogy, instruction, and modes of delivery have all needed to be (re)conceptualised and (re)configured during this time of great uncertainty (Aristovnik et al., 2020; Ghazi-Saidi et al., 2020). This is something we have appreciated, however, as it has freed us to reimagine what we want to happen in our classrooms now, and in the future. It has also given us room to place more prominence on our cultural knowledge systems, values (Karenga, 1986; Verharen 1995), and ways of making meaning in our instruction.

As literacy professors who instruct, read, and provide feedback on copious writing assignments, we especially saw the need to think about and discuss how to make allowance for all that is needed to help student writers articulate and produce their best work. This, in turn, leads us to re-envision the how and what we do about writing instruction and feedback. Thus, what resonates and makes sense for us is to centre ourselves and our culture through the use of Adinkra symbols and Yoruba proverbs for instruction, feedback, and dialogic discussions because we enjoy the opportunities for authenticity, intersubjectivity, and reciprocity they provide (Bakhtin, 1986; Nicol et al., 2014). Therefore, we make the case for the use of African-centred praxis, more specifically, Adinkra symbols and Yoruba proverbs to facilitate instruction and dialogic exchanges, and to provide feedback that exposes students to a different type of thinking, being, and doing (Tatum, 2014).

Figure 1

SANKƆFA Adinkra Symbol

Theoretical Framework

We ground our work in African-centred theory (Shujaa, 1994), and Peirce's (1991) triadic model of representing signs, interpreting signs, and object-creating signs to understand both the importance of centering our Africanness in our pedagogy and research and the meaning that can be made with Adinkra symbols and Yoruba proverbs. Both Adinkra symbols and Yoruba proverbs are rooted in West African philosophies and ideals and are imbued with meaning. As Ghanaian and Nigerian scholars respectively, Adinkra symbols and Yoruba proverbs give us additional layers of tools that are authentic to our cultural heritage and background in our meaning-making process.

Adinkra symbols, from the Akan people of Ghana, carry historical, philosophical, and various religious beliefs at the core (Adom et al., 2016). They are concepts or aphorisms which become useful when words simply fail to hold the same power and significance (Adom et al., 2016). They are used when events cannot be encapsulated by words alone since the symbols are pregnant with a depth of meaning for both interlocutors (Adom et al., 2016; Willis, 1998). Adinkra symbols are "based on various observations of and associations between humans and objects they use, flora and fauna scenes, the human body and its parts, and elements of nature, [geometric] and abstract ideas" (Arthur, 2001, p. 33).

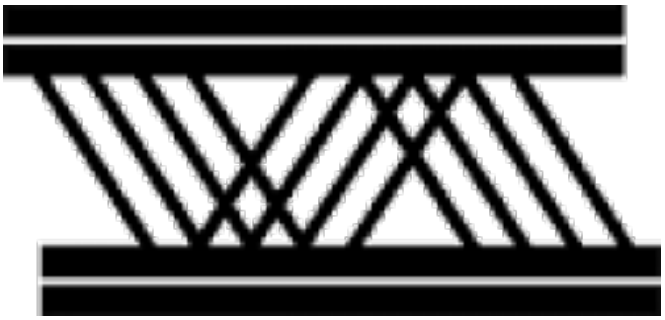
The symbols often change over time and are "reflective of the new ideas that have developed as a result of social, cultural, and historical changes" (Danzy, 2009, p. 3). Indeed, Adinkra symbols have been recognised for their aesthetic features, often appearing on pieces of art "textiles, pottery, stools, umbrella tops, linguist staffs[1], gold weights, jewelry, swords, architecture," and much more (Quarcoo, 1994, p. ix); but it is most commonly seen on clothing, stools, or combs in today's society (Danzy, 2009). The appearance of Adinkra symbols on many objects serves to demonstrate the value of these symbols, as linguistic tools that convey both meaning and an aesthetic quality. It, in fact, elevates the meaning and aesthetic value of the object. This is largely because of the linguistic value the Adinkra symbols carry—as mentioned earlier.

Adinkra symbols are also a "translation of thoughts and ideas, expressing and symbolizing the values and beliefs of the people among whom they occur" (Agbo, 2006, p. ix). These symbols are tied to the values of the Akan people of the Asante tribe, who often used these symbols as folktales to teach morals and lessons. For example, the very well-known Adinkra symbol SANKƆFA (Figure 1), which means "Go back for it", also means that there is a lesson in learning from the past (Kuwornu-Adjaottor et al., 2016). This symbol encapsulates the Akan's love of their history; the wisdom in their folktales and proverbs. The

[1] Linguist staff is an insignia of office for an Ashanti ruler

Figure 2

ÔWô-FORO-ADOBɛ Adinkra Symbol



lesson here is to learn from the past to appreciate and improve the future (Kuwornu-Adjaottor et al., 2016).

In addition, the Adinkra symbol, ôWô-FORO-ADOBɛ (Figure 2) means "A snake Climbs a Raffia". This alludes to the fact that it is hard for snakes to climb smooth, baked trees, but they can climb thorny, raffia trees (Kuwornu-Adjaottor et al., 2016). What this means is that one would need great strength and determination to accomplish any extraordinary feat, and the lesson is to be diligent and never give up until one achieves one's goal. This symbol is used to show clear admiration for people who achieve great endeavors. It should be noted that there are hundreds of Adinkra symbols, each with its inherent meaning. They are of great significance, especially as

> Akan nonverbal communication manifests itself in diverse ways, the Adinkra symbols are among the few most recognized nonverbal communication modes in Akan…One should also bear in mind that the logical value of the Adinkra symbols used by Akans as a mode or channel of communication is less important; Akans rather value their communication values. (Kuwornu-Adjaottor et al., 2016, p. 33)

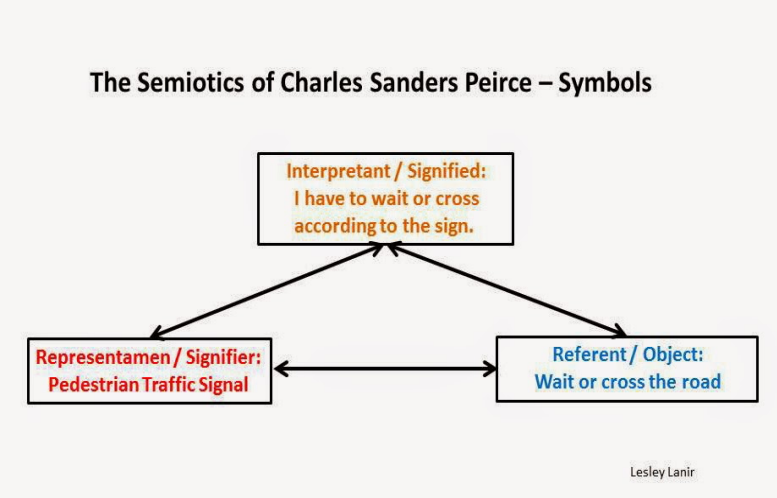
Yoruba proverbs, which are equally latent in meaning, originate from the Yoruba-speaking people group in Southwestern Nigeria, the Benin Republic, and the Togolese Republic of West Africa (Akintoye, 2010). They are an essential tool in Yoruba conversational art, for "anyone who dexterously uses proverbs in any conversation is often regarded as super literate and intelligent among the Yoruba people" (Olajide, 2016, p. 22). Proverbs are used to underscore concepts in conversations (Agbaje, 2005; Coker, 2012; Idowu, 2019; Ogunwale, 2008), as a creative tool to provide flavor and depth, and for meaning-making. This is reflected in the proverb, *owe l'ẹsin ọrọ, ọrọ l'ẹsin owe, t'ọrọ ba sọnu, owe la fi nwa, meaning proverb is the horse or vehicle for transporting meaning in conversation*—when words are inadequate, a proverb is the appropriate meaning-making vehicle.

Other African tribes and languages also use proverbs, which are rooted in the experiences of these individual people groups, and often reflect the cultural experiences of the tribal or language groups they specifically represent (Amadiume, 1994; Owomoyela, 2018; Usman, Mustafa, & Agu, 2013). As a result of the commonality of experiences and worldviews shared by various people groups, some of the proverbs overlap in meaning. For example, the Ibo (or Igo) people, who live in the eastern part of Nigeria, and speak the Ibo (or Igbo) language, also use proverbs as profusely as the Yorubas[2] and within the repertoire of Igbo proverbs are some that are strikingly similar to Yoruba proverbs. Hausa-speaking people are predominantly located in northern Nigeria, and they also use similar proverbs as the Igbos and Yorubas. For example, the Igbo proverb, *Nwata kwoo aka, o soro okenye rie ihe* has an overlapping meaning with the Hausa saying, *In yaro ya wanke hannun sa, zai iya cin abinci tare da*

[2] Chinua Achebe's novels are a ready point of reference here.

Figure 3

Peirce's Triadic Model



sarakuna, and the Yoruba proverb, *Ọmọ tó mọ ọwọ́ọ́ wẹ, á bá àgbà jẹun*. When translated, these statements mean *if a child washes their hands well, they could eat with kings or elders*. This proverb is used to affirm the belief that with hard work and diligence, wisdom can catapult a person to heights otherwise unimagined.

The Igbos also say *Onye na-eri awo ya rie nke gbara agba*, while Hausas say *In kana so ka ci kwado, ka nima wanda ya yi kiba da yauki,* and the Yorubas express the same sentiment by saying *Ẹni bá máa je ọ̀pọ̀lọ́, a jẹ èyí tó lẹ́yin.* These proverbs essentially mean *"if you want to eat a toad, you should look for a fat and juicy one."* This saying is comparable to the "*Don't settle…*" sayings; and they are used to spur a person to consider the possibility and need for insisting on the best, even in situations that are not as palatable as they initially long for.

And so, proverbs are very versatile tools used in projecting powerful imagery into conversational art within the African experience (Ademowo & Balogun, 2014). For the specific purpose of the subject of this paper, these proverbs are, therefore, authentic expressions of intangible cultural heritage (UNESCO, 2003) within the Yoruba peoples' interlocutory experience.

African-Centred Theory

African-centred theory expresses the African worldview (Shujaa, 1994). An African worldview is broad, consisting of myriad cultures, tribes, tongues, and beliefs at its core. However, despite this, it is important to acknowledge that both Blackness and Africanness are not monolithic. Thus, African-centred theory is primarily concerned with defining African psychological experiences from an African perspective, and this perspective can reflect an African positioning (based on one's personal African tradition and ideals) to the meaning of life, relationships with oneself, as well as others (Parham, 2002). For us as scholars, this is more prevalent in our pedagogical practice through the use of Adinkra symbols and Yoruba proverbs. For someone who is from another African country, it may be something entirely different, however. At its nexus, African-centred theory provides a theoretical basis for individuals of African descent—the space through which they can express their unique cultural experiences and values, and be understood within the

same framework (Karenga, 1986; Keto, 1990; Myers, 1987, 1993; Verharen 1995). As a "studied, vigorous, and creative elaboration of African culture and ideology" (Shujaa, 1994, p. 321), it creates "a frame of reference which affords phenomena to be viewed from the perspective of the African person" (Asante, 1991, p. 171). African-centred theory promotes agency as it provides "a strong sense of identity, history, and culture to deal with some of the problems of [their] existence today and in the future. It also embodies a struggle for the total liberation of the African mind from the effects of slavery, colonialism, and neocolonialism" (Dei, 1994, p. 5). It is a means by which provision is made for a better understanding of points of view that are derived and centred on African experiences and values (Dei, 1994).

Semiotics Theory

Semiotics is the study of signs and is a type of system of communication (Yakin & Totu, 2014). Semiotics essentially accounts for everything that can either be interpreted as a sign or visually seen with one's own eyes (Eco, 1979). In fact, many believe that "culture should be studied as a communicative phenomenon based on signification systems" (Eco, 1979, p. 22). Any cultural phenomenon is also seen as a sign phenomenon, and thus a process of communication (Yakin & Totu, 2014); which is why semiotics theory works so well with our use of Adinkra symbols, Yoruba proverbs, and African-centred theory. The theory gives space for cultural expression and communication to thrive. Semiotic theory, therefore, focuses on "methods of structuring and operating the symbols system, which means the ways symbol systems are structured and how those systems are operationalized" (Yakin & Totu, 2014, p.8).

This leads us to Peirce's triadic model. According to Peirce's (1991) model, the sign (symbol/proverb) used in the context of classroom dialogue and feedback would be considered the signified or interpretant (Saussaure, 1916); which is the concept it represents. Meaning is then made in the mind of the student (interpreter) (Atkin, 2010; Peirce, 1991).

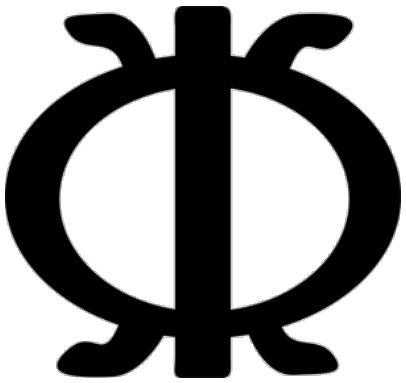
Thus, the interpretant is the meaning made out of the sign, while the interpreter is the one who receives the sign. Secondly, some signs have specific signifiers (or, representamens) that are needed for the interpretation process. In fact, sometimes, words or further explanation would need to accompany said symbol to further reinforce learning or meaning-making opportunities. Furthermore, for the Yoruba proverbs, actions and appropriate visualisations are often evoked as a sign for students to make meaning from a language they are not familiar with. Additionally, proverbs often tell a story, thus actions are often used to represent certain words or phrases as part of the story-telling process (Ademowo & Balogun, 2014).

Lastly, because students may not have a good grasp on Adinkra symbols or Yoruba proverbs, one could argue that proverbs and Adinkra symbols, and the words that often accompany them, act as the object, which, when married together, provide an overall shared meaning/concept of a particular sign. For example, the Adinkra symbol in Fig. 4 means "seed of the Wawa tree."

The object (socially understood and shared meaning in Akan culture) of this symbol is that a Wawa tree is very strong and hard, and it's typically the symbol for someone who is strong and tough (Zhe & Bawuah, 2019). It is meant to be an inspiring symbol; intended to help someone persevere through hardship (Zhe & Bawuah, 2019). So, by providing this feedback to someone who is familiar with the object of this sign, or showing them the symbol during a dialogic discussion, they would understand what the sign represents. But the students we encounter generally are not, therefore, it is imperative to include the sign as a whole (be it visualisation, action, or accompanying explanations), to discuss the shared

Figure 4

Wawa Aba Adinkra Symbol



meaning (object). This practice becomes a shared experience with students to enhance their literacy practices, as well as their personal and literate identities.

Symbols in the Classroom

Mellissa–As a Black British woman living in the U.S., I am essentially a Black immigrant in this space, and in the U.K. too because of my Ghanaian heritage. This has always made me consider my Blackness and what it means to me, to others, and in different spaces. At the time of writing this, I have lived here for 11 years. Moreover, the one question that I am asked almost daily is: "where are you from?" Where *am* I from? I have come to wonder about that question and what it means as a person, as a scholar, as a friend, as a wife, and so on and so forth. I often find myself explaining my British accent but Black skin by responding "I was born and raised in England, but my parents are from Ghana", to which I get vigorous nods of understanding, and oftentimes, relief or excitement. It finally makes sense to them why I look the way I do but sound the way I sound. They can place me somewhere now.

I am still trying to figure out what that question means to ME, however. I already felt a little out of place in England as a black immigrant because I was not fully British, and yet not fully Ghanaian (this was everyone's assessment but my own). When I would visit Ghana, I was told I was white because I look and sounded different; and in England, I adhered to some Ghanaian traditions and cultures, and therefore, I was not fully British, either. Now I am in the United States, this issue of 'not belonging', or feeling as if I do not have a specific space has been further magnified and complicated.

Here in the U.S., I have had to be cognisant of my positioning towards students, as well as how I positioned them towards each other and myself based on how I was seeing them react to me. Teaching in predominantly African American schools in the U.S., I noticed that students often related what they were learning back to my background and where I was from. Many questioned my ethnicity because of my accent. They were all curious and my very person and identity sparked myriad questions. It was often a point of conversation with many teachable moments. I quickly began to embrace that I was a Black woman from England occupying a Black immigrant identity in a different country, which seemed to serve as a catalyst for dialogue and actually helped students better contextualise some texts and make global and local connections.

I teach a doctoral class in seminal studies of literacy research which begins in June and ends in January of the following year. This is in a midwestern University, with all White doctoral students studying Literacy Research Education. The students are all veteran teachers, ages 36 to 55. I started this class for a new cohort of 11 just after the lockdown in 2020 and was due to end in January 2021. This is an intense class that culminates in a symposium where 50-60 people are in attendance. For this most recent iteration, however, I had to pre-record the candidates' presentations and hold the symposium virtually because of COVID-19 restrictions. This, of course, added to the candidates' stress and anxiety

considering this symposium had never been done virtually before. This, in conjunction with all the instructional changes that took place during the length of the course, put many of the candidates at the threshold of what they could bear. I recognised this and wanted to honour their efforts. The only problem was, I did not want to give them just verbal feedback, as that did not seem robust enough, considering the excellent work they had produced despite the circumstances. It felt like we had really gotten to know each other beyond just schoolwork. That we were involved in each other's lives; we had hoped, prayed, and counselled one another when our bodies were riddled with illness, when depression sunk in, or when we wept due to very real-life events. We had shared all of these experiences very authentically in the classroom, so writing a few grades did not seem appropriate. Some students had just gone through divorces, while others had very sick relatives, or had gotten extreme cases of covid. We were all feeling like we had overcome something together and I felt that something they had not encountered before, something that was beyond their usual mode of communication, could be a way to spark joy.

Using Yoruba Proverbs in College Classrooms

Invoking my Cultural Heritage

This is when I decided to invoke my cultural heritage as a form of feedback. I wanted to give each student an Adinkra symbol that I felt represented their growth and character during this seminal studies class, but also as a summative piece of feedback. I knew that as a Black immigrant educator, sharing these West African symbols with White students could be complicated. But, for me, it was more of a gift of myself to them, and for them to understand that there are different, and sometimes better ways of being celebrated and making meaning than the traditional, Eurocentric way. I was able to be authentic in my feedback, and they were exposed to an alternative knowledge-making system. I felt this was a more accurate, holistic, and honouring depiction of the work they produced, and the growth they experienced as individuals and scholars. Moreover, I used the symbol to inspire me to write a little note about each person, and to help illuminate and contextualise the meaning of the symbol. For example, I gave the symbol of the Wawa tree I spoke of earlier, to one student who had a hard year with personal, health, work, and family challenges. But she did not give up, and she was relentless in wanting to produce excellent work. I decided that for this sign to be taken as a whole (Peirce, 1991), it needed to be further contextualised with words inspired by the symbol. Therefore, I coupled the Wawa tree symbol with the following words:

> *Very few people go through what you do, grit their teeth, and pummel through. You are determined to produce excellent work and it shows. Your innate and quick grasp of concepts is amazing, and we are always stunned by the passion and wisdom you bring. The field of education needs people like you to champion those who need it.*

The Impact of Adinkra Symbols

At the time I shared these symbols with the candidates, I did not know the impact this would have. I later found out that this particular candidate tattooed this Wawa tree on her arm so she could reflect on it whenever she had hard times. This could be deemed as cultural appropriation, but her reasoning showed that she was beginning to understand the depth of what that symbol meant to people she recognised as having very different lived experiences to her. She noted that the feedback was one of the most meaningful experiences and moments she'd had as a student and that she chose to embrace the symbol as a constant motivational force in her written work, and in her life.

When I started teaching this particular cohort in another class, another student confided that they were especially touched by the symbol and had done more research on it since. They expressed the importance to remember that even adults need a ceremonial closure at times. She said she felt seen by me because I not only recognised her work, but also her humanity. The symbol represented my students as people and was more than just about their work. Therefore, it felt like a very grand and important culmination of their experience.

Olabisi - I am originally from Nigeria. I immigrated to the United States as an adult about two decades ago and now identify as Nigerian-American. Nigeria was colonised by the British, and as a result, English is the lingua franca—the language of government, education, commerce, and so on. I learned English when I started school, although I also had to learn to speak pidgin English because it is the language of day-to-day communication on the streets. My native language is Yoruba. Naturally, I grew up speaking Yoruba at home and in my immediate familial community. I am also married into a Yoruba-speaking family and one in which proverbs are also copiously used in ordinary day-to-day conversations. As a result of these, I have become quite versatile in the art of Yoruba oral speech traditions and in the infusion of proverbs into conversational art.

"Yoruba proverbs are often an expression of what the Yoruba society considers the facts of life, based on their collective experiences."

I grew up in an era when there was little or no television entertainment. Our evening family times mainly consisted of us children gathering around my father in the courtyard under the stars in the open African skies. My father would be reclined in an African hammock, and we, the children, would sit on the floor in a circle around him. My mother and the older children would be hustling and bustling in the outdoor kitchen nearby, preparing dinner. It was in those magical evening gatherings that my father shared traditional Yoruba folktales, proverbs, and oral traditions with us. As children, we took great pride in who could best interject relevant proverbs into conversations to show how smart we were.

Yoruba Proverbs

Yoruba proverbs are often an expression of what the Yoruba society considers the facts of life, based on their collective experiences. These proverbs are used in both day-to-day phatic communication and for deeper-level interlocutions (Ademowo & Balogun, 2014; Osoba, 2014). Among the Yoruba people, the depth of a person's wisdom is often revealed in the level of the person's ability to interject appropriate proverbs into conversations and/or enunciations. Growing up in such a tradition, therefore, the use of proverbs comes naturally to me when trying to explain or describe concepts in the classroom.

While I teach such courses as Introduction to College Writing and English Composition to the general student population in the Community College, I also teach Reading and Writing Strategies to students who are placed into developmental-level courses. Students who are placed into developmental level courses are not necessarily international or non-native speakers of English, they have been identified, through an array of multiple placement measures, as needing additional reading and/or writing support to be successful in college-level reading and writing across all departments. These developmental courses are sometimes taken as prerequisite classes while some students choose to take them in tandem with other college writing courses. In addition, the objectives of the developmental courses are not only limited to

reading and writing strategies but also include such topics as time management skills, study strategies and techniques, accessing college resources, motivation and goal setting, and other such skills that students need for general academic success. I use proverbs whenever I need to explicate ideas in either the composition or the developmental classes.

To explain the importance of agency in student success, for example, I would use the proverb, "*omo to ba si'pa l'obi ngbe*," meaning, *it is the child that raises their arm that the caregiver picks up*, while at the same time, role-playing a visual description of how the child who wants to be picked up literally lifts up their arm. With this proverb, we discuss the need for the students to utilise the various resources and avenues like staying in close contact with their professors to ask questions—for clarifications and/or advocacy, to use such facilities and resources in the college such as the library, the writing tutors, counselors, and so on—for support and for success. This is often a needed conversation to have with students who may be otherwise hesitant or sometimes unaware of such services.

In addition, to introduce the need for reviews, editing, and proofreading support for their papers, I share the proverb, *"agbajo owo la fi nso'ya,"* meaning, *a person needs to put all five fingers together to beat the chest in the process of self-affirmation.* As I say this, I role-play the action of beating my chest with my four/five fingers put together. With this, I explain that for an individual to achieve and claim success in any endeavour, they often need support from other people, for example, in the peer reviewing process, in which writers learn to lean into suggestions from peers to produce better work. The same explanation goes for the use of the various tutors in the learning center.

Another proverb that I use to illustrate this is "*owo kan ko le gbe'ru d'ori*," meaning *just one hand is not sufficient to lift the load to the head*. For this proverb, I often give a lot more cultural perspective. I explain to the students that in the traditional African setting, luggage is often transported by balancing it on the head. I show them pictures of different people balancing loads on their heads, hands-free. I then explain that at the initial stage of lifting the load from the ground to the head, these people often need another person(s) to help achieve this feat.

As discussed earlier, it is important to reiterate that sometimes, action is an inherent and salient part of the sign—a symbol for it to be understood in full (Peirce, 1991). Of necessity, at the initial stage, I not only share and translate the proverb, but I also need to give enough background details and material in the form of role-playing, visualisations, explanations of the cultural context, and whatever else is necessary to sufficiently explicate the concept to shed enough light on the proverb, so that students are brought on board. This often works so well, and students get it, so much so, that when next I use such proverbs, I usually do not need to go through the detailed explanation anymore, I only simply reference them.

Discussion

Sometimes words fail us or are simply "not enough" to fully get our point across while opening students up to a different type of meaning-making process. We contend that our students benefit from a more well-rounded understanding of the world, afforded through our meaning-making practices of the use of Adinkra symbols and Yoruba proverbs. This deliberate African-centredness not only gives us voice in our classrooms, but also exposes students to global understandings of literacy practices. Additionally, as literacy has become more culturally and globally inclusive (Dreamson, 2018), and in light of our shared pandemic experience, we needed to become more creative with our practices in order to reach all students and conduct solid research.

Using these symbols and proverbs to discuss difficult concepts enables students to think about ideas beyond the Eurocentric traditions and ways. It de-centers model Eurocentric practices and foregrounds a lived experience students may know nothing about (West African literacy experiences) but one they may be able to relate to (Oppong-Wadie, 2020). There is much beauty in symbols, signs, and sayings that elicit a response from the reader, listener, and learner. They are compelling. This, coupled with the rich language practices of our respective West African countries, provides so much opportunity for meaning-making and expanding of normalised, hegemonic thinking (Oppong-Wadie, 2020).

Implications

Enriching students' literacy practices by bringing in multiple literacy practices, identities, and cultures is imperative (Gay, 2002, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1992,1995). We are widening the angles of literacy research, enabling people to be and do differently (Tatum, 2014) in their own thinking and teaching about literacy. Also, this enriches the field of literacy research by adding another angle to how we view, disseminate and live in literacy. Classroom sites should be spaces where students and teachers feel they can bring their whole selves into. While we work to be inclusive and honor students' funds of knowledge as they make meaning and develop their literacy skills, perhaps teachers' funds of knowledge should also be honoured and brought to the fore, so they too can expand their literacy practices and development. This, in turn, could broaden the depth, knowledge, and understanding of literacy for their students. Additionally, with the dynamism that literacy presents, it is important to make room for it to continually evolve and become even more robust.

Asɛmfua a Etwa to[3]

Yorubas say "*awo enu ko se se ilu, atelewo ko se fi ro ina, aso iroko ko se fi bo ara*"—meaning *the skin of the cheek is not ideal to fashion the drum, neither is the palm of the hand the right tool for stoking the fire, nor a piece of cloth woven from the bark of an iroko tree[4] suitable for wrapping around the body*—we only use the appropriate materials and resources to tackle the job at hand. For us as literacy professors of West African descent teaching English in American Universities, when English words fail us, the recourse we have is to reach into the inner recesses of our Africanness and use these tools—tools that we find comfortable, familiar, and rich from our cultural experiences.

[3] This means "A Final Word" in Twi, the language of the Asantes who use Adinkra symbols.

[4] The iroko tree is a large long-lasting tree. It is used for many purposes and is believed to have spiritual and healing properties.

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