Lesson Plan: Proverbs Are Universal
Provided by the Art Institute of Chicago Department of Museum Education

Suggested Grade Level: 3–6
Estimated Time: 3–4 hours

Introduction
Proverbs are used to comment, advise, teach, and inform; often they have dual meanings, saying more than one thing at a time. Many African cultures are full of proverbs, and for some it is a sign of intelligence to have the ability to use proverbs appropriately in various situations. Not surprisingly, because proverbs are important, they are often represented in art.

In this lesson, students encounter a staff once owned by a spokesman for an Asante chief in Ghana, which bears a sculpture that refers to a proverb. They are introduced to various African proverbs and their American equivalents in order to help them appreciate the universality of observations about other people. They become linguists themselves by representing and sculpting a selected proverb for a golden staff and acting as the teacher’s spokesperson for a day.

Lesson Objectives
• Analyze the form, origin, and function of a work art.
• Gain an introduction to proverbs in Africa and the United States and appreciate their similarities.
• Represent a proverb in a three-dimensional work of art.
• Communicate messages to a group.

Key Terms
• proverb
• Ghana
• Asante Kingdom
• sculpture
• linguist
• abstract
• gold foil
• finial
Instructional Materials

- What I See When I Really Look Activity Sheet
- chalkboard
- paper
- pencils
- long, straight, and strong branches
- various three-dimensional Styrofoam shapes
- round-edge scissors
- toothpicks
- newspaper
- flour and salt
- gold and black tempera paint
- brushes: medium and small

For teacher’s use only

- gardening hand shears or pruning shears
- glue gun

Procedures

Discussion

- Review the description of the Linguist Staff with Rooster and Hen (Okyeame Poma). Show the object to students. If using the Web to view the object, take advantage of the close-up view.

- Have students fill out the What I See When I Really Look activity sheet. After they have completed this, make the following observations and ask the following questions to encourage a discussion of the object’s form:
  - The staff combines recognizable forms and abstract shapes. Name all of the animal forms you see. How can you tell which is which? What are they doing? What are all the abstract shapes that are carved on the staff?
  - What do you think this object is made of? How was it made? Was it carved from one piece of wood or assembled from several pieces? How can you tell?

- Explain to students who once used the staff and why they used it. Use the map to show them where the staff was made. (See Books and Media for further references to the Asante Kingdom and its art in Ghana.)
• Define proverb for students and provide an example (e.g., “Look before you leap.”). Have students think of as many proverbs as they can and write them on the board.

• Tell students that African proverbs generally refer to animals, plants, social structures, or experiences common in Africa. Note that the animals on the top of the staff illustrate an Asante proverb. Have students guess what this might be then tell them the proverb it is intended to illustrate.

• Introduce students to other African proverbs and their American equivalents. Discuss what each means and brainstorm clever ways to visualize them.

Activity

• Tell students that they will make a staff illustrating a proverb, like the *Linguist Staff with Rooster and Hen*. Have them choose a proverb that they can picture in their mind. Ask them to draw one or more sketches of it on paper. Encourage them to create a design that is simple and can be reduced to a few basic forms.

• Have students select Styrofoam shapes that will become the sculpture on top of their staffs. Encourage them also to select shapes for the base of their staff as well.

• Have them use toothpicks to join the shapes. Allow them to use round-edge scissors to cut the shapes.

• Ask students to tear pieces of newspaper into small strips. Then have them make paper-maché glue by mixing one part flour to two parts water until the mixture is the consistency of thick glue. (Adjust the amount of water or flour as necessary.) Have students paper-maché their forms and let them dry.

• After using shears to make the top of each branch flat, use a glue gun to adhere students’ sculptures to their staff.

• Have students paint the entire branch and sculpture with gold tempera paint. Encourage them to add abstract shapes to their staff with black paint.

Evaluation

Base students’ evaluations on their understanding of proverbs as expressed through participation in class and staff decorations. For further assessment, have them explain their designs in front of the class and provide an example of a situation when the proverb they have represented might be meaningful.

Follow-up: Select each student to bear his or her staff and act as your spokesperson for a day. If possible, use the proverb on the student’s staff as a theme for the day. Encourage the student to use the proverb at least once to express one of your messages to the class.
Glossary

Asante
Akan-speaking culture concentrated in the forest area of south-central Ghana.

The Asante kingdom was established in the 17th century. It consolidated a number of separate states, each headed by a paramount chief under a king, or Asantehene. Many Asante visual arts are connected to verbal arts, such as folktales, proverbs, jokes, and riddles that relate metaphorically to various situations in Asante life, such as child-rearing, war, farming, politics, or religion.

Illinois Learning Standards
English Language Arts: 2, 4
Fine Arts: 25–27
What I See When I Really Look

- I first noticed: (include why) ____________________________________________

- The basic shape of this object is:
  square   rectangular   round   oval   triangular
  But other shapes I see are ____________________________________________

- It seems to be made mainly out of:
  wood   metal   stone   clay   fabric   shell   other (fill in) __________
  But other materials I see are __________________________________________

- The surface is mainly:
  shiny   dull   smooth   rough   plain   fancy   painted   carved
  But it is also ______________________________________________________

- The object is:
  symmetrical   asymmetrical   simple   complex   other (fill in) __________

- Title ____________ Country ____________ Ethnic Group ____________

- What I personally like most
  about this object is (include why) and/or my
general thoughts about it are:

  ________________________________________________________________
  ________________________________________________________________
  ________________________________________________________________
  ________________________________________________________________
  ________________________________________________________________
  ________________________________________________________________
  ________________________________________________________________
  ________________________________________________________________
  ________________________________________________________________

- Draw the object in the space below
Animal Proverbs Current in the United States

The early bird catches the worm.
A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.
You can wait until the cows come home.
You can't teach an old dog new tricks.
Don't put all your eggs in one basket.
A leopard can't change its spots.
You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink.
That's like locking the barn door after the horse is stolen.
What's good for the goose is good for the gander.
Don't count your chickens before they hatch.
Beware of a wolf in sheep's clothing.
You can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear.
Don't let the cat out of the bag.
The dog's bark is worse than its bite.
Let sleeping dogs lie.

Proverbs Current in the United States

Don't cry over spilt milk.
Look before you leap.
Don't bite off more than you can chew.
Better be safe than sorry.
A stitch in time saves nine.
Don't judge a book by its cover.
Make hay while the sun shines.
Better late than never.
The apple doesn't fall far from the tree.
One rotten apple spoils the barrel.
Don't make a mountain out of a molehill.
Oil and water don't mix.
It's like finding a needle in a haystack.
Silence is golden.
Waste not, want not.
African Proverbs

From the Fante of Burkina Faso -
(English equivalent phrase is indented and in italic below)

Without the head, the snake is nothing but rope.
After the leopard there is no other.
A good spirit always looks after her young.
Like the vine we can conquer any problem.
A snake does not bite a man without cause.
Fish grow fat for the benefit of the crocodile.
If you play push with the porcupine, expect to get sore hands.
If you put corn on the ground, birds will not be a rare sight.
   If you challenge us, you can expect a response/
   You reap what you sow.
If the viper is too heavy to carry, why take the cobra as a head cushion.
   Don’t bite off more than you can chew.
When there are no trees left, birds will perch on men’s heads.
   Look for reasons behind the strange behavior of others.
When the scorpion stings you, you must treat it in the same fashion.
   Fight fire with fire.
The monkey leaps only as far as it can reach.
   Look before you leap.
We can carry water in a basket using a cactus as a cushion.
   We can achieve the impossible.
Although the elephant is stronger, we give the stool to the antelope.
   Brains before brawn.
Only a brave man will go under a big tree.
   Venture into the unknown.
If you shoot at the leopard and do not kill it, it is better not to have shot at all.
   Think before you act/Finish what you begin.
Will you fly or will you vanish?
   There is no escape.
If a child wants to pick a ripe pepper, let him do it. When it gets in his eyes, he will stop himself.
   Experience is the best teacher.
African Proverbs

From The Art Institute of Chicago *Gold of Africa*, 1990 teacher manual (now out of print). English equivalent phrase is indented and in italics below.

If you beat a lion, it is your own head that aches.

*If you are disrespectful to a chief, you will suffer for it.*

The egg says, “I am like authority. If you hold me too hard I break; if you let me go I fall and break to pieces on the ground.”

*A chief should be neither too severe nor too lenient; he must exercise his responsibilities with care and moderation.*

One head does not make a council.

*There should be consultations when an important decision is made.*

The porcupine whose spears cover its back, who is able to conquer it? (A reference to the invincibility of the Asante in battle.)

The brown scorpion: when it stings you the pain goes until nightfall.

*If you incur a chief’s displeasure, you will feel it for a long time.*

African Proverbs

From The Art Institute of Chicago *Arts of Africa*, 1989 teacher manual (now out of print). English equivalent phrase is indented and in italics below.

These proverbs, followed by their region of origin, are examples of the lively visual imagery that is characteristic of African speech. An English equivalent to each has been included to demonstrate the universality of human thought and experience. These are not, of course the only possible English parallels, and you may wish to work with your class on discovering others. Remember, however that the language in each African saying reflects a specific physical and cultural environment; while the ideas conveyed may apply to many cultures and peoples around the world, the images used are unique to their own time and place.

One camel does not make fun of the other camel’s hump. (Guinea)

*People who live in glass houses shouldn’t throw stones.*

Rain does not fall on one roof alone. (Congo)

*We’re all in the same boat.*

When spider webs unite they can tie up a lion. (Ethiopia)

*There is strength in numbers.*

When a bee comes to your house, let her have beer; you may want to visit the bee’s house someday. Congo (formerly Zaire)

*Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.*

What the child says, he has learned it at home. (Gambia-Senegal)

*The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.*
Before healing others, heal thyself. (Gambia-Senegal)

*Physician, heal thyself.*

One must talk little and listen much. (Gambia-Senegal)

*Talk is silver, silence is gold/Children should be seen but not heard.*

What goes in at one ear goes out by the other. (Gambia-Senegal)

*What goes in one ear comes out the other.*

He who puts aside his spoon to draw from the pot with his hand, does not do so twice. (Gambia-Senegal)

*Once burned, twice shy.*

He who rises early finds the way short. (Gambia-Senegal)

*The early bird catches the worm.*

When a fowl eats your neighbor’s corn, drive it away; another time it will eat yours. (Ghana)

*Do unto others as you would have others do unto you.*

Fire and gunpowder do not lie together. (Ghana)

*Oil and water do not mix.*

He is a fool whose sheep run away twice. (Ghana)

*Experience is the best teacher.*

One bad nut spoils all. (Ghana)

*A rotten apple spoils the barrel.*

The potter eats out of a potsherd. (Ghana)

*The shoemaker’s children go without shoes.*

What is not eaten is not cooked. (Ghana)

*Waste not, want not.*

Frowning and fierceness prove not manliness. (Nigeria)

*A dog’s bark is worse than its bite.*

When one is carrying water and happens to spill it, if the calabash not be broken, you can get more. (Nigeria)

*Don’t cry over spilt milk.*

Patience is the best of dispositions; he who possesses patience possesses all things. (Nigeria)

*Patience is a virtue.*

A stream coming down won’t let you swim up. (Nigeria)

*You can’t swim against the current.*

A man always breaking off from his work never finishes anything. (Nigeria)

*A job worth doing is worth doing well/
Finish what you start.*

When a man sees sunshine he dries his tobacco. (Nigeria)

*Make hay while the sun shines.*

It is not worth talking about a slip of the foot as if it were a fall. (Nigeria)

*Don’t make a mountain out of a molehill.*