

Through an Artist's Eyes: Jacob Lawrence's *The Migration Series*

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Overview. This module launched a three-month interdisciplinary unit on the Great Migration, featuring the artwork of Jacob Lawrence and the music of the blues. Designed as a Building Background Knowledge Workshop*, the module invited students to step inside the narrative of the Great Migration and develop historical empathy by immersing them in Jacob Lawrence's series of 60 paintings known as *The Migration Series*. A multisensory gallery walk featuring panels from *The Migration Series*, as well as primary sources, photographs, poetry, quotes, maps, and blues music, helped build background and context. Drawing on their developing schema, small groups created and performed skits based on a select sequence of panels from *The Migration Series*. Students then compared their skits to Lawrence's picture book *The Great Migration: An American Story* and learned about the painter's life.



After the Building Background Knowledge Workshop, students explored the Great Migration through the eyes of poets Langston Hughes and Eloise Greenfield, as well as through the eyes of historians, comparing and contrasting firsthand and secondhand accounts. They studied the structure and history of the blues and how it gave expression to the struggles, sufferings, and hopes of African-American migrants. For a final product, students composed their own blues poems, songs, and collages. They performed their blues songs at House of Blues in Boston, opening for the Blues SchoolHouse Band!

Time Frame. 10 days, 1 hour per day (for Building Background Knowledge Workshop)

Grade Level. grade 4 (can be adapted for use in middle school)

Curricular Connections. history, language arts, visual arts, music

***Note:** This module is part of an interdisciplinary curriculum unit on the Great Migration entitled *Going North: African-American Journeys* based on the practices of Expeditionary Learning. In Expeditionary Learning, the Building Background Knowledge Workshop kicks off the unit or with an immersion experience that ignites students curiosity and sparks interest in the topic. Students build background knowledge in the content of the topic, but are focused more on raising questions than answering them.

Guiding Questions

- *Why do people move?*
- *How can the arts help us understand history and ourselves?*

Learning Targets

(Learning targets are objectives that guide instruction. They are written in concrete, student-friendly language, shared with students, and tracked carefully by students and teachers during the learning process.)

- *I can understand and explain why millions of African Americans migrated from the South to the North during the Great Migration.*
- *I can discuss what I like about Jacob Lawrence's artwork and how it helps me understand the Great Migration.*

Common Core Standards and Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks

Massachusetts Social Studies Frameworks

- Describe the diverse nature of the American people by identifying the distinctive contributions to American culture of African Americans, including an explanation of their early concentration in the South because of slavery and the Great Migration to northern cities in the 20th century, and recent African immigrant groups and where they tended to settle in large numbers.

Common Core English Language Arts & Literacy in History and Social Studies

- Determine the main idea of a text and explain how it is supported by key details; summarize the text.
- Explain events, procedures, ideas, or concepts in a historical, scientific, or technical text, including what happened and why, based on specific information in the text.
- Report on a topic or text, tell a story, or recount an experience in an organized manner, using appropriate facts and relevant, descriptive details to support main ideas or themes; speak clearly at an understandable pace.

Massachusetts Visual Arts Frameworks

- In the course of making and viewing art, learn ways of discussing it, such as by making a list of all of the images seen in an artwork (visual inventory); and identifying kinds of color, line, texture, shapes, and forms in the work.

Massachusetts Music Frameworks

- Listen to and describe aural examples of music of various styles, genres, cultural and historical periods, identifying expressive qualities, instrumentation, and cultural and/or geographic context.

Materials

- chart paper and markers
- enlarged reproduction of panel no. 57 from Jacob Lawrence's *The Migration Series*, along with several small copies
- several foam-core panels to display gallery walk images
- LCD projector, computer
- large map of the United States
- MoMA Audio: Kids: Jacob Lawrence. *The Migration Series*, 1940–41. <http://uat.moma.org/explore/multimedia/audios/1/15>
- book: *The Great Migration: An American Story* by Jacob Lawrence (picture book)

Other Resources

Sources for gallery walk images, primary sources, quotes, and music

Teaching Kit

- *Jacob Lawrence and The Migration Series Teaching Kit* (TPC Teaching Kit). Washington DC: The Phillips Collection, 2008. http://www.phillipscollection.org/migration_series/index.cfm

Websites

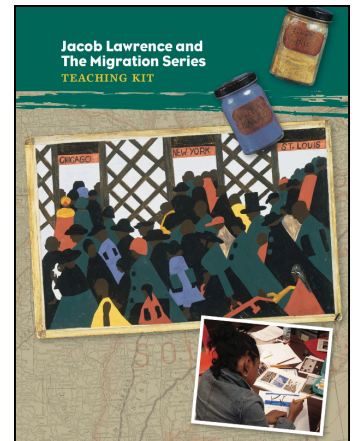
- *In Motion: The African-American Migration Experience*. The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. <http://www.inmotionaame.org/migrations/landing.cfm?migration=8>
- *The Great Migration*. Amistad Digital Resource for Teaching African American History. www.amistadresource.org/plantation_to_ghetto/the_great_migration.html
- “*Sir, I Will Thank You with All My Heart*”: *Seven Letters from the Great Migration*. History Matters: The U.S. Survey Course on the Web. <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5332>
- The Jacob and Gwen Knight Lawrence Virtual Resource Center. <http://www.jacobandgwenlawrence.org/artandlife00.html>

Books

- *Story Painter: The Life of Jacob Lawrence* by John Duggleby.
- *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration* by Isabel Wilkerson

Music

- “Freight Train Blues” performed by Trixie Smith
- “Rock Island Line” performed by Leadbelly
- “St. Louis Blues” performed by Bessie Smith and Louis Armstrong



INSTRUCTIONAL PLAN

STEP 1: MYSTERY IMAGE

Present Jacob Lawrence's panel no. 57 from *The Migration Series* as a mystery image. Guide them through a four-step process: 1) **Observe.** *What do you see?* 2) **Question.** *What do you wonder?* 3) **Connect.** *Who or what does the image remind you of? How does the image make you feel?* and 4) **Infer.** *What do you think the image is about?* Provide an organizer for students to record their observations, questions, and inferences. The objective is to hook students, to engage them in thinking critically about a visual image, and to help them distinguish between their observations and their inferences.

STEP 2: PICTURES TELL A STORY

Distribute to small groups packets containing copies of a series of five or six panels from Jacob Lawrence's *The Migration Series*. Each packet should contain panels that together tell a story with a theme based on a push/pull migration factor: employment, poverty, housing, segregation, racial violence, injustice. Students look closely at each image, discussing and recording their observations, wonderings, and ideas. Each group then looks for connections between the images and sequences them to tell a story. *Who are the characters? Where are they? How do they feel? What are they doing? Why? When does the story take place? Which images go in the beginning, the middle, and the end? Why?*

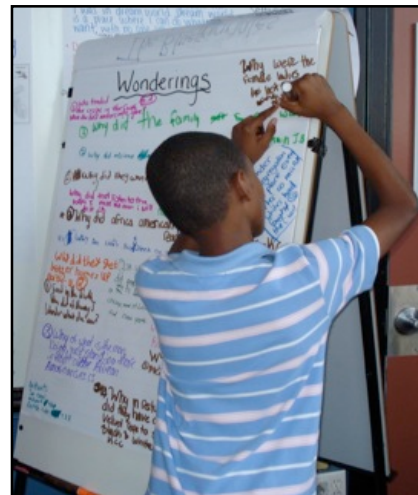
STEP 3: REVEAL EXPEDITION TOPIC

Students identify common themes in their packets and guess the topic of the expedition. They discuss why people move, drawing on their background knowledge and personal experience, as well as the information they can infer from their migration packets. Use a map of the United States and a timeline to introduce the Great Migration as a historical period that followed slavery, the Civil War, and Reconstruction. Introduce the words *migrate*, *migrant*, and *migration*. Introduce the learning targets.

STEP 4: GALLERY WALK

Preparation. Ahead of time, create a gallery consisting of all 60 panels of Jacob Lawrence's *The Migration Series*, along with captions, primary source materials, and quotes next to each image to give it a context. In addition to text and images, select blues songs to play during the gallery walk. Display around the room five large response charts with the following headings: 1) Art, 2) Music, 3) Powerful Words and Big Ideas, 4) Connections, 5) Wonderings.

Procedure. Students walk silently around the gallery—observing, listening, and recording their responses to the images, words, and music on the five response charts. After the gallery walk, review the response charts with the whole class and pull some of the observations and questions for discussion. The goal is to inspire curiosity, build schema, make connections, and stimulate conversations.



STEP 5: REVISIT THE GALLERY

Students visit the gallery again. This time, their goal is to locate the specific images in their packets within the gallery and to use the information they discover to help them sequence their images in a narrative order that tells a migration story. Groups identify the theme of their narratives—why their characters migrated.



STEP 6: PUT THE PIECES TOGETHER

In their small groups, students share the information they discovered and complete a Story Planner to help them organize their ideas. Each group then decides and plans how to present their story. Groups can narrate their story or perform a short skit or a tableau. (In a tableau, groups of students construct a freeze frame of a scene in a story through body placement, facial expression, and the use of a few props. For an interesting twist, have someone tap a character to hear what the character has to say about what he or she is doing and why.)

STEP 7: SHARE AND PERFORM

Each group presents its migration story to the class. After each presentation, the audience identifies the reason the characters migrated. Reasons are recorded on a “Why African Americans Migrated” chart. (Students can add to the chart as they continue to learn more about the migration). Students critique the presentations, identifying what they did well and what they could do to make their presentations even better.

STEP 8: COMMON TEXT

Listen to a Museum of Modern Art audio clip (see Materials) that briefly introduces *The Migration Series* and describes how Lawrence created the paintings. Then, together read the *The Great Migration: An American Story* by Jacob Lawrence. Pause to discuss panel no. 57 and have students revisit their original observations and ideas about the painting. *What new ideas do they have about the woman in the painting?* Share background information about the painting and about Lawrence’s mother, who spent long hours cleaning homes to support her family. After reading, ask students to compare Lawrence’s text with the migration stories they presented. Add any new ideas to the Why African Americans Migrated chart.

STEP 9: INDEPENDENT READING

Students read Lawrence’s excellent one-page introduction to *The Great Migration: An American Story* looking for the reasons that motivated Lawrence to tell the story of the Great Migration in his art and completing a timeline of Lawrence’s life. They explore the meaning of vocabulary words such as *migration*, *exodus*, *population*, *rural*, *uprooting*, *triumph*, and *adversity*.

STEP 10: REFLECT AND ASSESS

Students reflect on the learning targets and complete a short quiz consisting of multiple choice and open-response questions.

MIGRATION STORY PRESENTATION RUBRIC

Criteria	3	2	1
Content (Theme)	The presentation gives specific details that portray why the characters migrated. The audience gets a crystal clear sense of what motivated the characters to leave their homes in the South.	The presentation gives some details that portray why the characters migrated. The audience gets a sense of what motivated the characters to leave their homes in the South.	The presentation does not contain details that portray why the characters migrated. The audience does not understand what motivated the characters to leave their homes in the South.
Facial Expression and Body Language	Facial expressions and body language tell the audience exactly how the characters feel and set a mood for the story.	Facial expressions and body language match the way the characters feel.	Facial expressions and body language don't match how the characters feel. Giggling and movements detract from the mood.
Voice	Clear, level-3 presentation voice can be heard and understood by every member of the audience. Voice expresses how the characters feel.	Clear, level-3 presentation voice can be heard and understood by most members of the audience.	Level-1 or -2 presentation voice cannot be heard or understood by the audience. Words are mumbled and spoken without expression.
Participation	All group members have played a role in the presentation. Group members have built on each other's ideas and have made decisions cooperatively.	All group members have played a role in the presentation. The group has made decisions cooperatively.	Group members have not participated equally in the presentation. At times, one group member has dominated the decision-making process.

Total Points _____

Teacher's Reflection

Kicking off our unit on the Great Migration with Jacob Lawrence's artwork really hooked students! Their level of engagement and excitement grew with each new discovery as they worked on constructing their own migration stories from the images. The task stimulated lots of wonderful collaborative discussions as students built on each other's ideas to revise and refine their stories.

Constructing their own migration stories from Lawrence's visual narrative really helped students empathize with the migrants and understand the choices they made. Students kept returning to Lawrence's images throughout the three-month unit, making connections and synthesizing information to deepen their understanding of historical events. After we started the unit, it became clear that students needed a language to help them talk about race and racism, as well as information about the historical periods that preceded the Great Migration. We used historical fiction picture books and biographies from the period of slavery to the Civil Rights movement, along with timelines and maps, to help students understand and discuss how the Great Migration fits into the African-American struggle for freedom and racial justice.

The interaction between art, music, and poetry was the heart and soul of the unit. Students made meaningful connections between art and writing by looking closely at how Lawrence created characters, setting, plot, and theme in his artwork. Analyzing Lawrence's use of lines, color, shapes, patterns, and recurring images also helped students analyze the choices that poets and musicians make to create a mood and communicate a theme. It was thrilling to witness the explosion of creativity at the end of the unit when students applied their learning to create collage self-portraits and to put their blues poems to music.

About Conservatory Lab

Founded in 1999, Conservatory Lab is a K1–6 music-infused charter school in the heart of Boston. We believe in the power of music to transform the lives of children and adolescents.

We use **Expeditionary Learning** as a framework for our unique interdisciplinary curriculum that integrates music and other creative processes. Our learning expeditions are discovery operations that demand fieldwork and mentoring by experts. We cherish active, hands-on situations where what we are doing matters to us and has consequences. Students strive to create quality work, to collaborate with their classmates, and to contribute to their community.

Conservatory Lab is also the only school in the country to incorporate **El Sistema** program and methods into its core school day. **El Sistema** is a unique program designed to effect social change and nurture promising futures for underserved communities through intensive, ensemble-focused music education.

For more information about Conservatory Lab, visit www.conservatorylab.org.

For information about the curriculum, contact Rachel Cates at rcates@conservatorylab.org.