

What's Your Story? Questions to Prompt Discussion

Clarkson University Common Conversations 2020

Step Afrika!

- How does stepping and Step Afrika! tell a story?
- Why do you think Step Afrika! invites audience participation?

Stepping

- How did stepping start? Why does stepping use the body, rather than drums or instruments?
- Why is stepping still important?
- How has stepping been utilized in African American fraternities and sororities to tell stories? Is this an effective way to communicate history? Why or why not?
- In the “*Gumboots and Greek Letters*” article, the author writes, “African American dance, especially, has been integrated into mainstream American culture to such an extent that it is no longer recognized as African American.” Do you think this could happen with stepping? What are some ways stepping could continue to be recognized as an African American art form? What are some other forms of dance, music, art, or culture that this has happened to?

Storytelling

- Why is your personal story, your own narrative, important to your identity and the choices you make?
- What is “narrative identity?”
- How and why is storytelling an essential skill?
- What are some ways you can shape your own story?
- How does the positive or negative framing of your story affect your perceptions and ability to deal with challenges?
- How can hearing or reading a story change our perceptions about someone, about a culture, about an incident, about a place?
- How can reading other peoples’ stories help us relate to our own?
- What does Adichie mean by a single story? What examples does she give? Can you think of others? Why is a single story dangerous? (*stories are points of identity; people have more than one story, more than one defining character arc*).
- How do we decide what stories we tell and why?

- What stories do we NOT tell and why?
- How do we move beyond mere “fact telling” to tell a story about ourselves that might be compelling and still reflect the truth about ourselves and our experiences?
- How do the stories we tell serve to construct a particular reality?
- How can stories shape how we view ourselves and how we are viewed by others?
- How does your story impact others?
- What stories do we tell about ourselves without actually “telling” a story? How do you present yourself to the world and what do you want them to know about your story by just looking at or talking with you?
- Why isn't having an experience enough, that we also have to talk about it?
- What about social media - how do we use that to tell our stories?
- What are ways you use your body to tell a story? How have you seen others use their bodies to express themselves?
- How can two people tell a different story from the exact same experience? What is the difference between those people? What are the similarities?
- How do the stories we tell affect our professional lives?
- How will coming to Clarkson become a turning point in your “transition story”?
- Which type of story will your Clarkson journey be: Quest? Rags-to-riches? Love? Revenge? Strange-land? Or something else?
- One author suggests finding your story by starting with your values. What values serve as the framework for your story?
- *The Two Kinds of Stories We Tell About Ourselves* outlines “redemptive” and “contamination” stories as two types of tales we spin. Have you experienced something that you would define as either? How has this narrative shaped your life and decisions?
- In the book *History of the Rain*, author Niall Williams states: "We are our stories. We tell them to stay alive or keep alive those who only live now in the telling." What do you think is meant by this?
- In his book *A Whole New Mind*, author Daniel Pink states: "We are our stories. We compress years of experience, thought, and emotion into a few compact narratives that we convey to others and tell ourselves. But personal narrative has become more prevalent, and perhaps more urgent, in a time of abundance, when many of us are freer to seek a deeper understanding of ourselves and our purpose." Would you agree? Why do you think this is?

Arts & Culture

- In an interview, Brian Williams, founder of Step Afrika!, reflected on the awareness and practice of stepping: “In 1988, Spike Lee released [the movie] *School Daze* which opened the floodgates: The art form spread throughout the African-American community and high school step teams developed.” What are some other cultural phenomena you’ve seen gain popularity because of their inclusion in pop culture media?
- How does artistic expression demonstrate the ways in which we are similar? Different? How do the arts help bridge cultural differences
- Do you participate in any cultural traditions or artistic expression? What does this mean to you?

OTHER

- In an effort to explain how African American students were able to replicate movements from the Kongo without having ever seen them, the music ethnologist Gerhard Kubik explained “that even if oppression and slavery attempted to stamp out a specific cultural trait such as African drumming, the trait would not truly disappear but would retreat into the bodies of the people, into their human psyche. The drum patterns, though perhaps never heard again, would be ‘transformed into a set of motional behavior,’ and then would ‘continue to be transmitted from mothers and grandmothers to their children, from father to son during work, non-verbally, as an awareness of a style of moving’.” This could be described as a kind of (perhaps indirect) cultural transmission. Can you think of other instances of this, personally or more broadly?
- In her Ted Talk, Adichie reflects: “the American writer Alice Walker wrote this about her Southern relatives who had moved to the North. She introduced them to a book about the Southern life that they had left behind. They sat around, reading the book themselves, listening to me read the book, and a kind of paradise was regained.” How does this relate to her idea of a single story?