Absent Narratives Resource Assessment Tool

Core Values

Amplify community solutions for change.

Build and strengthen relationships.

Learn from and with multiple voices.

Increase Engagement

Recognize the power of story and the danger of absence.

The Minnesota Humanities Center has designed a unique framework, centered around four core values, to help educators integrate ***absent narratives*** – those voices often left out or marginalized – into the classroom.

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The Humanities Center believes that schools are, first and foremost, human communities made up of individual histories that meet together in a shared place. In order to improve academic achievement, we must close the relationship gap with our students and communities through the sharing and telling of these absented stories and histories. The aim of incorporating absent narratives is to create what the Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe calls a "balance of stories," which opens up the space for increased engagement.

About Absent Narratives

Absent narratives are the lived experiences – the stories, art, music, and histories – of people and place. Absent narratives are not absent from the communities they are a part of, but are often left out, overwritten, absented, by a dominant story. These human experiences are told by people <u>from</u> the communities the stories are a part of, authentically and unmediated. It is the practice of the Humanities Center to not ask one person to speak for all members of a community. Instead, many voices from multiple communities add accuracy and authenticity to these shared histories.

About the Absent Narratives Framework

K-12 curriculum often absents whole cultures and peoples, or relegates their importance to a unit, celebration day, or month. This absence bears a tremendous cost for all students. Curriculum that devalues the contributions of cultures and communities detracts from a message of shared humanity. For students who come from traditionally marginalized communities, it translates into a lack of engagement in the classroom – a gap in relationship and understanding between students and educators, as well as between communities and schools.

Guidelines for using the Absent Narratives Resource Assessment Tool

Use this framework as a guide to respectfully assess and interrogate resouces for use in your classroom and curriculum. This tool does not provide a rubric for assessment. Rather, through thoughtful questioning, you will be able to surface the needs of your students and reveal unconscious biases that you or the resource my have. Ultimately, you will decide how to move forward in your current context, knowing that your understanding may change over time, as well as the needs of your students.

If you checked "yes" for most of the criteria, this resource is likely vetted by the community it is about and is appropriate for use.

If you checked "some," proceed by asking yourself the following questions:

- Do you have other resources that better address your topic or could be paired with the resource in question?
- Could you use this resource and give a "disclaimer" about the limits of the context, form, or content?
- How might this resource generate discussion in your classroom? Do you have the tools needed to facilitate this discussion sensitively and appropriately? How will you do so?
- Who can you ask to help you decide how to proceed?

If you checked "no," proceed by asking yourself the following questions:

- Knowing the needs of my students and classroom, should I proceed using this resource?
- Are there different resources that are more appropriate?
- Is the resouce strong enough in other areas to warrant further cosideration? If so, what other resources could I pair it with to create a "balance of stories?"

If you checked "unsure," proceed by asking yourself the following questions:

- What more information do you need?
- Looking to your existing relationships, who can you ask or consult to gain clarity? What relationships do you need to build first before asking for this knowledge transfer?

As you review resources:

- Keep in mind these foundational questions:
  - Whose experiences are represented?
  - Whose experiences are left out?
- Document your review process, including your reasoning.
- Use the tool with a group to build the collective capacity of your team to assess resources.
- Reflect on how your responses to these questions might resonate in communities with ways of knowing and being that differ from your own.

Build and Strengthen Relationships

Meaningful relationships develop from listening to authentic narratives told by the people closest to the stories. When these stories are listened to and understood as *essential* to the experiences that make up our communities, we build the foundation for long-lasting relationships.

	Yes	Some	No	Unsure
Portrays a shared humanity This resource presents the communities represented with dignity and humanity. *Looking through the resource, are the people presented as having agency? Autonomy? Strength? Power? Identity?*				
Encourages respectful engagement with difference This resource provides an opportunity for my students to respectfully engage with the lived experiences of communities that may differ from their own.				
Recommended through relationship This resource was recommended to me through a relationship with an organization or person I trust.				
Reflects my students This resource reflects the multiple lived experiences of students in my classroom or school.				
Is usable and appropriate for students This resource is usable and appropriate for the needs of my students. (Consider age, intent of use, cultural contexts, etc.)				

Recognize the Power of Story and the Danger of Absence

If relationships are the foundation of authentic community engagement, then stories are the building materials. Authentic community engagement must allow space for the multiplicity of community voices to emerge.

	Yes	Some	No	Unsure
Focuses on the lived experiences of specific communities If this resource is an overview about a larger community, it accounts for the heterogeneity of the sub-communities that make up the larger community. *Analyzing the context of the resource may draw attention to ways it reinforces a "single story" of a community. Resources that are more specific tend to represent lived experiences more honestly and authentically. The broader the scope, the more likely it is for a community to be generalized.*				
Engages through respectful imagery and visual identity This resource presents content in a visual manner that is respectful to the communities it represents. *The imagery in this resource takes into consideration the specific cultures and histories of the communities it is about and depicts them in a respectful manner. This resource does not employ the use of caricatures or substitute imagery from other communities.*				
Acknowledges historical and contemporary existence This resource accounts for both the historical and contemporary lived experiences of the community described. *Some resources may portray a community as only existing in the past or discounts the longevity and historical presence of a traditionally marginalized community.* *Example: "Dakota people <u>had a</u> very different relationship to this place than white settlers." Versus, "historically, Dakota people had a very different relationship to this place than white settlers, and this relationship continues today."*				
Is up-to-date and accurate This resource has been updated and includes the most current research and understanding about the topic, or the resource is explicit that content is specific to a historical time and place.				

Learning from and with Multiple Voices

Authentic community engagement requires a relationship-centered process. Learning *about* communities involves knowing who, what, where, and when. Learning *from* and *with* communities requires an examination and awareness of our own ways of knowing and being and a recognition that there is no one way of solving problems.

	Yes	Some	No	Unsure
Employs learning from vs. about This resource allows my student to learn directly *from* members of the community this resource is about. The content is not filtered through a narrator from a different community.				
Presents a balance of voices This resource presents a balance of multiple perspectives. *Resources which attempt to discuss issues in a binary manner (bad vs. good) are probably distorted to a certain extent. They are rarely, if ever, that simplistic. Pair resources that do not meet this criteria with additional resources that provide a balance of stories.*				
Demonstrates respect for multiple ways of knowing The narrator understands the cultural contexts of the societies in which the content takes place and/or assumes that there is not a single way of doing things "right." *Some resources may privilege one way of knowing or being over another.* *Watch out for loaded words like: "backward," "quaint," "underdeveloped," "exotic," "simple," "crazy" or any words or imagery which suggest that the customs and lifestyles discussed otherwise deviate from an arbitrary "norm."*				

Amplifying Community Solutions for Change

Challenges are best solved by building upon existing community successes. Through meaningful relationships which surface multiple ways of knowing and being, organizations amplify the rich creativity and imagination of communities to tackle problems and create equitable systems and practices.

	Yes	Some	No	Unsure
Responds to a community-identified need This resource was created in response to a community-identified need.				
Created by the community This resource was created or authored by someone from the community the resource discusses.				
Amplifies asset-based contributions This resource draws attention to the accomplishments of a particular community (without tokenizing, patronizing, objectifying, exoticizing, or exceptionalizing). *Some resources minimize the existence of a community saying "those people" are absent.* *Example: "As of yet, Asian Americans have not stepped up in areas of social justice." Versus, "There are plentiful examples of Asian Americans working for social justice but because of discrimination, these stories are often missing."*				
Recommended through the community This resource was recommended to me by someone in the community this resource is about.				