

Joy Harjo and Tupac Shakur's Lesson on Life

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Grade levels: 9th-12th Grade

Duration: 3 hours

Materials: Pencil, paper, copies of "Remember" by Joy Harjo and "Keep Ya Head" by Tupac Shakur (official music video)

I am a big, big fan of Tupac and love a lesson plan that incorporates hip hop and poetry. Hip hop is a culture, and poetry is a living, breathing being within that culture. Tupac has a brilliant way of bridging these worlds into one, and that's why I love pairing his work with some of my favorite poems.

Facilitator Preparation

It's helpful to have a background on Tupac Shakur (rest in power) as a rapper and poet. An excellent place to start is his book of poems, "[A Rose that Grew From Concrete.](#)" Fun fact: he wrote most of the lyrics at 17 years old! A second place to start is exploring hip hop educator [Brian Mooney's Breakbeat Pedagogy Hip Hop and Spoken Word Beyond the Classroom Walls.](#) Finally, it's crucial always to explore your own social biases through your self-reflection and commitment to learning and personal growth. It's important to ask yourself why you are inspired to teach this work? What's your relationship to this movement? How does your relationship to work impact how you present this work to others? Watch [Keep Ya Head by Tupac Shakur Official Music Video.](#)

Introduction

Before beginning any lesson, it's also important to establish group norms and expectations as a community. This is done by setting classroom expectations instead of rules. When these have been established, dive deeper into building connections with the participants by sitting down and getting to know each other. This can be done by modeling for the participants by introducing yourself, your pronouns, something that relates to your day outside of facilitation (for example, a highlight of my day was I got to get my favorite coffee this morning) and asking the student to do the same.

Wax Poetics Annotation

Present and discuss [Keep Ya Head by Tupac Shakur Official Music Video.](#) This should be watched as a group and serves as an introduction to deeper discourse and poem inspiration. Use the questions below to facilitate a group discussion about the video:

1. What life lessons and advice does Tupac want the listener to remember?
2. What lyrics do you connect with and why?

3. "Keep Ya Head Up" is said often in this song (an excellent opportunity to build on this lesson and teach the power of a refrain). Why?
4. What would you think he would change if Tupac could build the future? What wouldn't he change?

Poem Annotation

Provide each student with their own copy of **Remember by Joy Harjo**. Ask them to read the poem independently and underline what they notice. Use the questions below to facilitate a group discussion about the poem:

1. What life lessons and advice does Joy Harjo want the listener to remember?
2. What lines do you relate to and why?
3. "Remember" is said often in this poem! (Side note: an excellent opportunity to build on this previous lesson about refraining and show the intersectional magic and flexibility of literary devices.) Why do you think the poet thinks this word is vital to this poem?

Bridge The Gap

Use the questions below to facilitate a group discussion that connects the artists and their work:

- If Tupac and Joy could have dinner, what restaurant would they go to?
- What has life taught them both?

Writing Activity

1. Provide every student with a clean sheet of paper and pen.
2. Allow students to use the following freewriting prompt (or their own prompt) to create a poem:
 - *I am learning to remember*
 - *Life has taught me*
 - a. *Literary Device Option: Use a refrain to enhance the repetition in your poem. A refrain is a word, line, or phrase repeated in the lines or stanzas of the poem itself. For example, Joy Harjo uses "remember" in her poetry, and Tupac uses "keep ya head up" in his song.*

Reflection Activity

In a group setting, you can hold space for students to share their writing. Be sure to frame this where students actively listen and encourage the reader via positive feedback.