

Motherline Writing: Building Content Connection through Storytelling

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Background and Context for Learning Activities

Matrilineal lineage refers to the line of descent through the maternal or mother's side of a family. Also called the motherline, this lineage can be biological, and when considering social and cultural contexts, can also include adoptive, temporary, and other forms of mothering or maternal status. Historically, the matriline referred to the passing down of family names, royal titles, property, or land. However, the passing down of behaviors, trauma, memory (e.g., kinesthetic or social), gestures, relational patterns, health, and stories expands our notions of what it means to connect to our motherline and how those connections lend to deep reflection and learning.

My experiences at the 2024 meeting of the International Association of Maternal Action and Scholarship (IAMAS) led me to reflect on how motherhood studies and, specifically, matrilineal narratives, drawing, and writing could contribute new pathways to content development, especially for creative courses such as choreography, composition, theatrical devising and scene development, creative writing, poetry, and visual arts practice (e.g., painting, sculpture, photography, or drawing).

As an aside, before trying these activities with students, it is important to remind students that the term *mother* is socially and culturally loaded and is full of inconsistencies, complexities, and individual interpretations. Further, the presence of a biological mother in students' lives is absolutely not a prerequisite for engaging in these activities; in fact, the more complex the family system and dynamics, the more possibilities there may be for rich, diverse outcomes in class. However, because family relationships can be triggering or emotion-laden, take care to introduce these concepts and the vulnerable self-reflection required of students in applying the activities.

Activity 1: My Mother's Hands

Ask students to open a notebook or journal and begin listing their motherline. Who came before them and after them in their families' matrilineage? There are no rules to this exercise except to respond however they'd like to this prompt. Once students have completed this task, ask them to write a list of things that have been passed down to them through their motherline. If necessary, you can provide a few examples such as favorite nursery rhymes or lullabies, recipes, values, expectations, hair color, property/homes, and

special traditions. Next, students will place their non-dominant hand on a separate piece of paper that is larger than their hand. They will trace the outline of their hand with their other/dominant hand. Prompt students to begin filling the space of their drawn hands, which are handed down from their mothers' hands, with the words they used to create their lists. Remind them not to spend too much time agonizing over placement, size, or relationship until they have finished. This new creation—a visual representation of inheritance—could now be the beginning of any number of creative projects or further research.

Activity 2: Motherline Time Drawing

In this activity, students can use their own motherline or they can be inspired by matrilineal representations depicted in a film, book, play, or music. Students will first draw a visual representation of this motherline, organizing the people in it in any visual way they see fit, which could include a family tree with roots and branches, as a waterfall chart, a timeline, or overlapping word cloud. Students will then draw relationships and life details about each member of the motherline drawing, using color, words, patterns, and shapes to represent time, emotion, events, and places. This activity can then be translated into a choreographic “map,” a devised theatrical scene, or expanded into a work of visual art.

In many activities exploring motherline writing, journaling after the experience is always fruitful and can lead to exciting discussions and further writing. By using stories and perspectives of their own motherlines, students honor and learn about their own origins and perceive their lives in a compelling framework.