

UMOJA PRACTICES

RAISING “INTENTIONAL & DELIBERATE

In Umoja we deeply value intentional and deliberate purposefulness. We should know why we are doing what we do; nothing should be random. This does not mean that learning and teaching is all pre-determined, proscribed, or pre-scripted. We are claiming here that we need to raise our capacity to be intentional and deliberate while creating “live learning” spaces and programs. Doing so helps our faculty engage a conscious dialogue informing their practice and choices, and helps us engender in our students a similar conscious dialogue about their practice and choices.

ETHIC OF LOVE—THE AFFECTIVE DOMAIN

When practitioners move with an ethic of love they touch their students’ spirits. Moving with an ethic of love means having a willingness to share ourselves, our stories, our lives, our experiences to humanize and make real the classroom. This leveraging of the affective—emotion, trust, hope, trauma, healing—moves the discourse deliberately as an inroad to the cognitive domain. Approaching one’s practice with an ethic of love implies a holistic approach—Body, Mind, Spirit.

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MANIFESTING

How does the student reproduce what you do in class with their friends, family, and community? Students should be able to put into practice what they're learning in your class. They should intentionally bring their learning into the community and share with family, folks that support them, friends who could benefit and be edified by the Umoja consciousness. The practice of manifesting intends to make sure that all of what we do in our programs is applied, connected, and relevant to the students' lives, and that the learning manifests inside the identity—spirit and mind—of the students. The question: "How is this manifesting in a way that is helping them survive in their daily lives?"—is part of the consciousness of all Umoja practitioners and in turn a part of our students' consciousness so they can take their learning with them outside our campuses.

UMOJA COUNSELING: AFFIRMING, INTEGRATED, INTENTIONAL

Umoja counseling is intentional and deliberate. It transcends the school environment and helps to empower students to make positive changes in their lives and the lives of their communities. We seek out the student, not waiting, immediately exploring what is going on with our students. Seeking out our students and not waiting holds our students close, keeps them in school, believing in themselves, each other and the Umoja program. To do best by our student's accuracy and wisdom matter. Umoja counseling has no walls, no time clock; dialogue is open and responsive, based in building relationship. There is a communal dimension to Umoja counseling.

THE PORCH

To say at all times "What Is Really Going On Here," a learning environment should be open, respectful, playful; there should be argument, dissection and revision. It should be personal, political and philosophical. The porch can often be candid and sometimes even painful. Storytelling is privileged and sometimes song breaks out. Porchtalk invites humor, noise, sometimes unruliness. A classroom with such honesty and visibility can produce frustration and also acceptance. Needless to say, trust is at the foundation of a Porchtalk learning environment and trust has to be earned, modeled, practiced, openly reflected upon, and revisited. Porchtalk is intentional, for example, the instructor looks for an opportunity to draw out, celebrate and dignify the quieter students, so all the voices in the room make up the porch. The porch is a place where our students safely communicate and advocate for themselves.

LIVE LEARNING

Live learning is risky; it is freewheeling and open. The instructor yields control of meaning and understanding in the classroom while keeping a keen eye on learning as it is emerging. Live learning implies that the learning experience is generative and performative. In a live learning situation, the exact content and learning experience are not known before the class session begins. Surprise and original language burst out all over the classroom; the instructor facilitates and culls the learning that is happening. Live learning intentionally captures and documents learning in real time. It is a way of having a discussion that really flies, while focusing the insight, capturing it on boards and in notebooks, so the discussion does not disappear after the students leave the class session. It is democratic and analytically rigorous at the same time. Live learning demonstrates to the students through their own words that language is powerful; ideas and texts are rich and can be made their own. Most importantly live learning demonstrates to the students that they are smart, deep.

LANGUAGE AS POWER

When we recognize and validate the language that our students bring to the classroom—that which they create amongst themselves—our students open up to the power of language. We can help them to develop a sense of pride, ownership and responsibility in their own speaking and writing. By so doing, we can bring our students inside the conscious experience of wielding language, all types of language—academic, standard, Black English, theoretical. Our classrooms can be a multilingual experience which provides an impetus for our students to represent themselves while crossing bridges into other, unfamiliar language they are bound to encounter in their lives. When our students experience language as power, curiosity, playfulness and agency replace what might have been standoffishness and uncertainty.

TAPPING AFRICAN AMERICAN INTELLECTUAL, SPIRITUAL, AND ARTISTIC VOICES

Informed by their distinct history, African Americans have created a unique African diaspora experience expressed through myriad intellectuals, artists and spiritual leaders. Umoja sees individuals like Phyllis Wheatley, David Walker, Frederick Douglass, Ida B. Wells Barnett, Robert Johnson, W.E.B. Dubois, James Baldwin, Maya Angelou, Alan Locke, Thelonious Monk, Malcolm X, Romaine Bearden, Aaron Douglas, Langston Hughes, Ra Un Nefer Amen, Cheikh Anta Diop, bell hooks, and many, many others as ancestral bridges—a way of reaching back while moving forward. The Umoja Community encourages our practitioners to continually mine the work of African Americans in the interpretation and construction of knowledge in our classrooms. We invite our students and ourselves to claim this richness that resides, so often, below the surface.

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AWARENESS OF CONNECTEDNESS TO AFRICAN DIASPORA

Umoja students are interconnected to African peoples around the globe. Umoja practitioners can facilitate an awareness of how students' actions impact all African people. This sort of practice intentionally traces the historical, political and cultural lines emerging from Africa. This practice encourages a global African consciousness in an effort to foster collective responsibility, empathy and self-awareness. This practice also actively asks that students join their voices and stories with the voices and stories of peoples across the diaspora. In this way, Umoja students will become aware of the diaspora and articulate their place in that experience.

COMMUNITY—BUILDING COMMUNAL INTELLIGENCE

Community is absolutely fundamental to an Umoja learning experience, for the students, the faculty, and the staff. Umoja practitioners intentionally call out and support students' talents in an effort to build community and self-esteem. By tapping the intellectual and social capital represented by our students, we build community and greatly enhance the meaning of our classrooms/offices. Beyond helping keep our students in school, building community causes students to be accountable to each other's' learning. Communal intelligence implies that we teach a willingness to see your own suffering and that of your sisters and brothers and taking responsibility for it. Community transcends our courses and services and reaches into the "I am, because you are."

ACCELERATION — ENGLISH, MATH, ESL, AND COUNSELING

The vast majority of our students begin community college in basic skills courses, and like many students, they often do not make it to transfer level English and Math. Students are warehoused. So often our students are taught from a deficit perspective; Umoja flips this and engages students from a capacity perspective. One-way acceleration has been talked about is as a shorter pathway through sequences, moving students more quickly through basic skills to transfer level courses. Of course shortening sequences, when it makes sense, matters. Many Umoja instructors are working with new accelerated curriculum expressions. The Umoja Community recognizes that faculty must design and own the curriculum which they offer students and that local authorship and expression is fundamental to the success of accelerated curriculum redesign. Umoja encourages "deep acceleration", where faculty go beyond structural changes into questions of pedagogy, practice, student capacity and current theories around adult learning. Furthermore, Umoja asserts that counselors are integral to the success of any innovative curriculum and pathway being offered to students.

OCCUPY STUDY SPACES ON CAMPUS

Studying in the Village—a dedicated, welcoming Umoja space where students study and spend time together—builds community and nurtures academic success. Designed by students and staff, the Umoja village is a sacred space that offers opportunities to increase exposure to historical and cultural experiences from the African diaspora. The Umoja village is an expression of and celebration of our students' voices and model for how students can approach their homework. Encouraging, even requiring, studying on campus works well with our students because it models, practices and affirms sustained and effective study habits for our students. We must positively and actively foster studying, deep concentration and creativity for our students to be successful in their academic pursuits.

MENTORING

"A wise and trusted counselor or teacher." A major reason students drop out of college is due to feelings of isolation or alienation. Mentoring is a practice that allows students to make a more personal connection with someone who can offer support, guidance, and encouragement while dealing with the challenges of managing school and life. Many Umoja programs offer mentoring for students in a variety of formats that may include faculty and staff mentoring, mentoring from the community and peer mentoring.

MATTERING

Mattering is intersectional—cultural, social, political, civic, spiritual. Given the years of institutionalized educational inertia, which often includes potent doses of failure and disaffection, we are being asked to create learning experiences that reclaim mattering and give agency to our students as matters. It matters what we teach; we must take a risk to include content that fuses suffering, identity and freedom. Mattering increases context while making choices about what is urgent. As matters students' experiences and perspectives become a critical resource to the knowledge and analyses emergent in the class and in the program.

UMOJA AS A POWER BASE

Umoja Community programs use their infrastructure, their resources, and their community as a model for Black achievement across the campus, state and nation. The dearth of ideas regarding Black student success, calls us out to participate actively and openly in the analysis and decision-making about how to reverse the tide. We share awareness with our students of their shoulders being leaned upon by their brothers and sisters, their mothers and fathers and many others. Our students, as leaders, are trained and empowered to engage faculty, administrators and staff alongside and on behalf of their peers to voice their desire to achieve their educational dreams and goals. Our students, as leaders, are empowered to partner with faculty in the spirit of dual commitment—"I commit to you, you commit to me." When we embrace our position, Umoja becomes more than a program; it is a privilege that will be leveraged, a power base from which action and commitment to success for historically under resourced students and others.

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ENCIRCLING DIVERSITY

Encircling diversity affirms my “I am” as we stand in a place where we feel embraced and connected to everyone and empowered to rebuke all forms of cultural domination of any kind. Encircling diversity brings about a fully-present student and challenges the community to make justice and freedom a primary question; in MLK’s words, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” When we encircle diversity, we are more than merely tolerant, we seek deep understanding and celebration of the way someone different than ourselves speaks, thinks, imagines, and becomes. When we encircle diversity, we acknowledge and appreciate our oneness and diversity becomes a resource, and a strength, to our Umoja community.

GIFTING

Sharing what we learn honors and extends learning. Umoja students become teachers and pass wisdom as they gift their learning to their family, their community, their peers in the program, and at Umoja events. Preparing the gift of learning by collectively identifying what is most meaningful, what is necessary and why this learning gift matters is an act of grace that helps us become accountable to each other’s collective intelligence for purposes that uplift the community. Umoja practitioners believe that knowledge and practice are communal and meant to be freely gifted. When we give a learning gift, we become conscious and thoughtful about belonging to each other’s achievement; our students become one thousand wide and ten thousand deep.

EVERYBODY’S BUSINESS

We are a village, acting in accord, and unafraid to be seen and heard as we do our work, leveraging every voice and source of information to do our best by our students. We gather and share information about our students. As Umoja professionals, we feel that including everybody in our distinct disciplines and work duties shares knowledge and builds commitment. In Umoja a counselor is an English teacher, a Math teacher is in the history class, an administrative assistant is a tutor and everybody is a coordinator. We know what each other is up to, in an intimate, detailed way, so that we can support and reinforce each other. We cover and pitch in on each other’s work, even while we maintain our areas of expertise. When a program event or program need comes up, we all inquire and support. And particularly when it comes to our students, we all stay aware of their progress, their challenges and crises, and their successes.

Learn more at UmojaCommunity.org