LESSON PLAN

Emojis and Me

Compelling Question: Why is it important to see ourselves reflected in and represented by emojis?

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Web Related Connections

Lessons
Hair, Identity and Bias
Identity and Diversity in My Generation
On-Screen Diversity: Why Visibility in Media Matters

Other Resources
Safe and Inclusive Schools for All

Key Words
culture
depict
emoji
derivation
gatekeeper
generation
hair extensions
immerse
inspiration
intricate
kiosk
plantains
premiered
scoured

LESSON OVERVIEW

O’Plérou Grebet, a 22-year-old digital artist from the Ivory Coast, was recently in the news because he created his own emojis, reflecting life in contemporary West Africa. Using a YouTube instructional video, Grebet created more than 365 emojis and a free app where the emojis can be downloaded. The app was named “The Best App of 2019” by The African Talents Awards, which recognizes young Africans in creative fields. Grebet created the emojis because he understood that West African people wanted and deserved to see themselves reflected in emojis, an important part of young people’s digital lives. Emojis not only reflect feelings and moods, they convey key aspects of our identity.

This lesson provides an opportunity for students to learn about the history of emojis, reflect on why O’Plérou Grebet created this collection of emojis and then create their own emojis to convey something about their own identity.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Students will understand and reflect on the history and purpose of emojis.
- Students will learn why representing one’s culture, nation and identity is important in using emojis.
- Students will create their own emojis to reflect aspects of their identity.

MATERIALS & PREPARATION

- Drawing West Africa, one emoji at a time (one copy for each student)
- Grebet’s Instagram collection of Emojis (www.instagram.com/creativorian/, to project on board/smart board)
- (Optional) Samples of Grebet’s Emojis (to be printed or projected)
- How to Make EMOJI YouTube clip (2017, 23 min., www.youtube.com/watch?v=D5ovTITGrSw)
- Drawing paper and markers, pencils or other drawing instruments

PROCEDURES

Emojis and their History

1. Begin the lesson by asking: What are emojis? What are some emojis you use frequently and why? Elicit/explain that emojis are small digital images that convey or represent an idea, emotion, symbol or object.

2. Divide students into small groups of 4–5 students each. Once in small groups, give students five minutes to come up with as many facts or things they know about emojis as they can. Set a timer to make it more exciting and
dramatic. After they come up with their lists, reconvene the class and have students share, one group at a time, something from their list. If an idea has already been shared, they shouldn’t share again. Do several rounds of small groups sharing until all their ideas have been shared.

**Note:** If you allow smartphones or tablets in your classroom, you may choose to allow students to use devices to learn more facts about emojis.

3. Share some or all of the following background information about the history of emojis:
   - The origin of emojis were “emoticons,” which emerged in the 1990’s. These were gestures using punctuation to convey messages such as : ) [happy], ; ) [sarcasm] and : ( [sad].
   - The first “emojis” were created in 1999 by Japanese artist Shigetaka Kurita. He wanted to design an attractive interface to convey information in a simple, succinct way. Emojis quickly became popular in Japan.
   - In 2009, a pair of Apple engineers, Yasuo Kida and Peter Edberg, submitted an official proposal to adopt 625 new emoji characters into the Unicode Standard. In 2010, Unicode officially adopted emojis, adding hundreds more. The Unicode Consortium oversees the official set of emojis that come on most smartphones.
   - In 2012, the emoji trend caught on so rapidly that it was added as a word by Oxford Dictionaries in August 2013.
   - In 2015, Unicode diversified the emojis by introducing the option to change the skin tone on people emojis. They also added same-sex couples and additions to include more types of people doing more types of things.
   - Recently Unicode has taken steps toward creating gender-neutral emojis, emojis that represent people with disabilities and other symbols to represent the full spectrum of emoji users.
   - As of March 2019, there were a total of 3,019 emojis in the Unicode Standard.

4. Ask students the following questions:
   - What do you like about using emojis?
   - How do you use emojis?
   - What is beneficial about using emojis?
   - What is limiting about emojis? What emojis do you use the most and why?
   - What do emojis convey?

5. Using the last question above (“What do emojis convey?”), engage students in brainstorming a list of ideas about what emojis convey, which could include some or all of the following:
   - thoughts, feelings, mood
   - how you feel about someone
   - aspect of your identity (race, culture, family composition, religion, etc.)
   - family, friends
   - hobbies, interests, talents, activities
   - greetings to someone
   - foods you like
   - traditions
   - holiday greetings
   - objects you like or that have a special meaning for you
6. Explain to students that today we are going to learn about O’Plérou Grebet, a 22-year old digital artist from the Ivory Coast who learned to make emojis on YouTube. Explain that Grebet created more than 365 emojis that portray contemporary West African life.

   **Note:** If your students don’t know where the Ivory Coast is, show them on the map and if time permits, share some information about the country: Ivory Coast Country Profile (BBC).

7. Explain that Grebet created the emojis because he understood that West African people wanted and deserved to see themselves reflected in emojis, an important part of young people’s digital lives. Grebet said: “I noticed that media and most articles about Africa were talking about the bad sides of the continent only. They reduced the image of it to a land in war where people are poor and hungry. These elements are true but it’s not everywhere on the continent.”

   These photos bothered Grebet so much that he wanted to find a way to show images that reflect the beautiful parts of the continent. Grebet is submitting some of his designs to Unicode Consortium, who oversees the “official” set of emojis that comes on most smartphones. His app was recently named the “Best App of 2019” by The African Talents Awards, which recognize young Africans in creative fields.

### Reading Activity

1. Distribute the article “Drawing West Africa, one emoji at a time” to each student and give them ten minutes to read silently or read aloud as a class.

2. Engage students in a discussion by asking the following questions:
   - Who is O’Plérou Grebet? What did you learn about him from the article?
   - Why did Grebet name his emoji project “Zouzoukwa?”
   - Why did Grebet decide to design the emojis?
   - How did he come up with his ideas for the emojis he created?
   - What do his emojis say about identity? In general, how do emojis reflect aspects of our identity?
   - Why do you think the emojis took off the way they did, especially among West Africans?

### Make Your Own Emojis

1. Have students download the app with Grebet’s emojis, “Zouzoukwa,” onto their smartphones or tablets. Using the app and/or Grebet’s Instagram collection of images, show some or all of the emojis.

   **Note:** If you do not allow the use of mobile devices in the classroom and technology is not available, print out or project some of the Samples of Grebet’s Emojis.

2. Engage students in a brief discussion by asking the following questions:
   - What are some of your favorite emojis?
   - What emojis would you like to learn more about?
   - What did you learn about life in West Africa by looking at these emojis?
   - How does Grebet, through the emojis, convey information about himself, his culture and his identity?

3. Explain to students that they are now going to create their own emojis and they will each create at least five or more.

4. Ask students to name some of the categories that emojis are sorted into such as: food and drink, activities, people and emotions, animals and nature, objects, activity and travel, etc. Then, engage in a brief brainstorming session where students share ideas for emojis. Explain that the emojis must reflect something about their identity, which could include:
   - their social identity groups (race, religion, gender, ethnicity, age, etc.)
their hobbies or interests
○ topics that are important to them
○ emotions or moods that are part of who they are
○ important relationships
○ some other aspect of identity

5. Tell students they can create their emojis by drawing them (using pencils, markers, crayons or paints) or they can create digital emojis. If they decide to create digital emojis, they should initially sketch them out on paper first. If they need help with their digital emojis, they can use the YouTube video, How to Make EMOJI that Grebet used in creating his. Explain that in creating five or more, the emojis will be developed as a collection that represents who they are, as Grebet did. Reiterate that their ideas for emojis must reflect something about their identity.

6. Provide time in class for students to generate ideas and begin working on their emojis. Give them additional class and homework assignment time to finalize the emojis. When they are completed, students can share their emojis with the class and possibly create an Instagram account with all of them, using the digital ones and photos of the drawings.

   **Note:** As an option, you can encourage students to submit their emojis to the Unicode Consortium, who oversee the official set of emojis that come on most smartphones. They can use this [Emoji Proposals](#) form.

**Closing**

Have students briefly share a sketch of one emoji they are working on and explain the connection to their identity.

**ADDITIONAL READING AND RESOURCES**

○ “The student creating African emojis to change the story of Africa from poverty to beauty” ([CNN World](#), December 18, 2019)
○ “The WIRED Guide to Emoji” ([Wired](#), February 1, 2018)
○ Where Did Emoji Come From? Here’s A Brief History of Everyone’s Favorite Pictograms — VIDEO ([Bustle](#), April 6, 2016)
○ “Why Do We Use Emojis Anyway? A Fascinating History of Emoticons” ([Readers’ Digest](#))
# Common Core Standards

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<td><strong>Reading</strong></td>
<td>R1:</td>
<td>Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Speaking and Listening</strong></td>
<td>SL1:</td>
<td>Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.</td>
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<td>SL5:</td>
<td>Make strategic use of digital media and visual displays of data to express information and enhance understanding of presentations.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Language</strong></td>
<td>L5:</td>
<td>Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings.</td>
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<td>L6:</td>
<td>Acquire and use accurately a range of general academic and domain-specific words and phrases sufficient for reading, writing, speaking, and listening at the college and career readiness level; demonstrate independence in gathering vocabulary knowledge when encountering an unknown term important to comprehension or expression.</td>
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Drawing West Africa, one emoji at a time

By Ryan Lenora Brown, Christian Science Monitor, adapted by Newsela staff on 12.19.19
Reprinted with permission from https://newsela.com/read/west-africa-emojis/id/2000003334/.

Word Count 570
Level MAX

It started with a New Year’s resolution.

On January 1, 2018, Ivoirian graphic design student O’Pléro Grebet made a vow. He wanted to create an emoji a day for 365 days. Each of them would depict some element of life in Ivory Coast or West Africa more generally.

He named his project Zouzoukwa. Zouzoukwa means “picture” in Bété. Bété is his mother tongue. Grebet began posting his creations to his Instagram page, @creativorian.

Grebet scoured his own life for inspiration. He started with his favorite snacks, like the grilled plantains wrapped in paper he bought from street vendors and the tiny plastic sacks of tart, sweet purple hibiscus juice he used to buy on his way to school. Then came the comb for his Afro. Then the zig-zaggy green and white jersey of the Nigerian national soccer team. He drew bags of hair extensions and kiosks selling cellphone airtime (“the best place to learn all the neighborhood affairs,” he wrote in the caption). He also drew the silver dome of the Basilica of Our Lady of Peace, an Ivoirian church certified by Guinness World Records as the largest in the world.
"The goal was to share African culture in a colorful and different way," he said. "I didn't have any idea that people would like it so much."

The project took off, helped along, Grebet thinks, by West Africans' desire to see themselves reflected back in the tiny, intricate images that had become like a second language to his generation. Despite the growing number of skin colors, professions, foods and other types of emojis on their phones, it was still clear the usual set of emojis was created by and for people who didn't look like them.

"People like to see the elements of their own daily life in their phone," he said. "And it's funny to have expressions that really correspond with the ones you use yourself."

Take Zouzoukwa #78, a cartoon face pointing to his left eye. It is an expression that in Ivory Coast means, "I told you so."

"An emoticon that our African parents are going to love," quipped one commenter.

Grebet finished his emoji challenge in December 2018. By then, the project had taken on a life of its own. His creations were winning graphic design prizes. A French TV channel had enlisted him to create special emojis to use on social media during the 2018 World Cup.

An advertising agency sent him a MacBook to use to make his designs. In January 2019, one year after the project first premiered, it became an app. Now, users can embed Zouzoukwa images as "stickers" in their text message or WhatsApp conversations.

By October of this year, Grebet graduated with a degree in digital arts and images from the Institute of Sciences and Communication Techniques in Abidjan. At the same time, the Zouzoukwa app had been downloaded more than 100,000 times. Next, Grebet says he would like to submit some of his designs to Unicode Consortium. The organization is the gatekeeper for the "official" set of emojis that comes standard on most smartphones.

Then, "I want to extend the project," he said. "Travel to other countries, immerse myself in their cultures and then transform them into emojis."

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Samples of Grebet’s Emojis

78. Tu as vu non
A popular facial gesture in Ivory Coast meaning 'I told you so.'

211. Chekeré
A West African percussion instrument made with a dried gourd.
68. Bantu Knots

A traditional hairstyle of the Bantu peoples. Zulu women wore this kind of hairstyle for various occasions in everyday life or in traditional ceremonies.

197. Bogolan

Clothing of traditional fabrics, this is a Malian fabric dyed using a complex mud/clay technique.
219. Farane

Farane is used for styling while detangling the long wavy hair of nomadic women.

326. Fanorona

An abstract combinatorial board game indigenous to Madagascar. It is played with a table and stones of two colors with a central hole. The object of the game is to capture all of the opposing stones.
12. Pastels

A fish or meat stuffed beignet.

18. Ashanti Stool

The royal and divine throne of kings of the Ashanti people and the ultimate symbol of power in Asante.
72. Zémidjan

A motorbike taxi that carries 1–2 passengers for short distances in towns.

307. Sotrama

A van modified and licensed to carry paying passengers along a fixed route.
87. Traditional ceremonial dress of women in Burundi, Rwanda and Uganda.

93. Basilique Notre-Dame de la Paix

Basilica of Our Lady of Peace is a Catholic minor basilica and the world's largest church.
363. Be advised

264. Toclo

A street tailor, usually a man with a sewing machine, who repairs damaged clothing in the streets.
290. Henné

Local drawings made of Mandinka women hands and/or fee during wedding and ceremonies.