



The Genocide Education Project

The stories "digniks" tell: Preserving Armenian culture through artifacts

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Rationale:

Exploring cultures is an integral part of developing social emotional intelligence. In the case of genocide education, deepening students' understanding of a culture allows them to engage more fully with the extent of the damage and long-term consequences of genocide beyond the number of deaths. In the case of the Armenian Genocide, the loss of lives, lands, and national and cultural institutions was accompanied by the real threat of the extinction of languages, national and religious traditions, professional expertise, and methods that had been passed down for centuries. Survivors of the genocide, now dispersed throughout the world, placed great emphasis on preserving their culture as a means of resisting genocide. Students will explore the significance of traditional Armenian dolls, “dignik” (pronounced “deegneeg”), in terms of their personal, historical, and cultural meaning, as well as the concepts of cultural preservation and resistance, promoting empathy and cultural awareness, especially in the context of genocide. To deepen students' understanding of the Armenian Genocide, utilize lessons 3, 4, & 5 of [Resistance, Agency, and Empowerment](#) on [The Genocide Education Project's](#) website.



Sequence:

Grades 6-12

Social Studies, English Language Arts, and Art Classes

Student Outcomes:

Students will:

- Explore the significance of historical and traditional objects that serve to help preserve cultural heritage
- Understand the historical and symbolic meanings of “digniks” in Armenian culture
- Create a replica of a “dignik” to share Armenians’ cultural expression and prompt contemplation of their own cultural identity

California State Standards:



CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.6-8.7/9-10.7 (Grades 6-10): Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively, as well as in words) in order to address a question or solve a problem.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.7: Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, as well as in words) in order to address a question or solve a problem.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.WHST.6-8.2/9-10.2/11-12.2: Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

CHSS.WHST.10.5.5: Discuss human rights violations and genocide, including the Ottoman government’s actions against Armenian citizens.

Materials:

- [Vocabulary and Translations](#)
- Slide Deck:  The stories “digniks” tell
- [Traditional Armenian dolls information handout](#)
- [Discussion questions: Traditional Armenian Dolls](#)
- [Digniks Cooperative Learning Groups](#)
- Video Link:  Nuri Dignik Video Instructions.mp4
- [Paper dignik instructions](#) and related materials
- [Fabric dignik instructions](#) and related materials
- [Post dignik, making discussion prompts](#)
- [Akh Ninar-Ode to a Girl Named Ninar](#)

Day 1: Introduction to Armenian Dolls (50 minutes)

Step 1: Introduce students to digniks using the Slide Deck, [*"The stories digniks tell"*](#)

Before you teach this lesson, please take the time to practice the pronunciation beforehand, using the [Vocabulary and Translations](#) provided.

Background Information: “Digniks” were very prominent in Armenian households and were usually made from cloth, thread, clay, wood, metal, wool, or even household items such as a broom or a spade. These dolls have become cherished family heirlooms, passed down through generations, and now hold an important ethnographic and preservative function, promoting and preserving Armenian national costumes, accessories, and customs (Armenian Geographic).

Use the slide deck to introduce digniks to students

1. Slide 1-2: Display the bell ringer writing prompt: “Write about your favorite childhood toy or other object,” and ask students to describe their chosen object through the 5 senses (whichever senses apply), to draw a picture with words. Ask them to reflect on what made the item so special.
2. Ask a few students to share their examples, and perhaps share one from your own life. Focus on what made the item so important that you remember it so vividly today.
3. Slides 3-6: Present the historical and cultural importance of “digniks”.
4. Slides 7-10: Share a few pieces of information on types of Armenian “digniks”
 - Asilik Vasilik (Ah-see-leek Vah-see-leek): Fortune-telling dough doll
 - Vichaki Arus: Ascension Day doll, involved in rituals to bring good fortune.
 - Nuri (Noo-ree) (Bride of Rain): Doll made to ask for rain and a good harvest.
 - Armenian “bride’s doll” or “Doll of patience” (in some regions, “sabri khrtsig”)(Sah-bree Khur-tseeg): given to brides.
 - Boy digniks: embodiments of traditional Armenian professional men OR made to scare away evil
5. Highlight how these dolls were deeply cherished and carried through difficult times, as they were thought to have magical powers and often represented protection, luck, or a connection to home and heritage.

Step 2: Analyzing the Significance of Dolls in Armenian Culture

1. Handout Documents A-E: [Traditional Armenian Dolls information handout](#) and [Discussion questions: Traditional Armenian dolls](#)
2. In small groups, ask students to read the Traditional Armenian Dolls information handout to themselves and then discuss the questions on the worksheet. At your discretion, you may ask each group to designate any number of roles, using the [Digniks Cooperative Learning Groups](#) as a guide:
 - a. Facilitator (discussion leader)
 - b. Researcher (seeks information to aid discussion)
 - c. Recorder (takes discussion point notes)
 - d. Writer (summarizes discussion consensus on handout)
 - e. Editor (reviews handout for accuracy of responses)
 - f. Presenter (reports handout answers to class)

Step 3: Reflective Discussion on Cultural Preservation

1. Ask each group's Presenter to report their discussion handout summaries.
2. Pose questions to encourage deeper reflection on cultural preservation, for example:
 - How might the practice of creating and keeping traditional dolls serve as a form of cultural resistance?
 - Why would these dolls be important to children or families who survived the genocide?
 - What does keeping cultural artifacts like these dolls say about the importance of heritage for future generations?
 - How do you think these beliefs in magical powers might influence kids to take dolls on these death marches and hold on to them dearly during the Armenian Genocide?

Step 4: Facilitate a brief class discussion based on students' reflections and earlier group discussions

Day 2: Dignik-making activity (50 minutes)

Step 1: Preparing students to make digniks

Students will have the opportunity to take part in the preservation of Armenian culture by making a dignik. There are different ways to make a “dignik”, and every student will put their spin on it. Before students begin making their digniks, you may find it helpful to watch this [video](#) from the “Machanents” center in Armenia. This center offers after-school programs in Armenia where kids of all ages learn how to make digniks. In addition to showing how to make the pre-sewn clothing dignik, the video goes through the explanation and symbolization of various pieces and materials used to make the digniks. It also includes a snippet of an Armenian folk song that was sung to “activate” the magic of the dolls. (See full song, lyrics, and translation here: [Akh Ninar](#)).

Step 2: Choose which type of dignik to make, then click the link for the instructions:



[Paper Dignik](#)



[Fabric Dignik](#)

Step 3: Make the Dignik:

Before the students start working on their digniks, display the materials they'll use and explain the symbolism Armenians attach to those materials:

- Sticks in the shape of a cross: Christianity
- Seeds/Lentils: Fertility and prosperity
- Coin: Wealth and good fortune
- Colors: Each natural color (green, red, tan, blue, pink) represents a different “power”: strength, wealth, fertility, life, and prosperity (i.e. happiness, health, purpose)
 - Ex: Green represents Fertility (corresponding with plants, nature, etc.) Or Tan represents prosperity (corresponding with wheat - the more wheat harvested, the more flour/food for the family, and the more money, as you can sell the wheat).

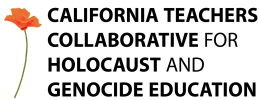
Encourage students to think about the significance of the object they are creating, reflecting on how it connects to the cultural heritage they are learning about.

Step 4: Post-dignik-making discussion

Facilitate a class-wide reflection or have students complete a discussion exit ticket on the experience of making their doll and what it symbolizes about cultural heritage and survival. Create your own discussion questions or use those on the [Post-dignik making discussion prompts](#) chart.

Extension Options:

- Family heirlooms like furniture, china, jewelry, etc., are often disregarded or discarded. Considering what you have just learned about these traditional Armenian dolls, what might be the potential impact of not knowing the history and significance of family heirlooms to the individual family and national heritage? What are your thoughts on preserving family heirlooms?
- Consider your cultural heritage and family. Is there something in your cultural heritage that would be a dignik equivalent? What is it, and what role does it play? What specific words or phrasing support your answer?
- Play the song [Akh Ninar](#) and have students read the lyrics. Why would Armenians choose this song to be sung to “activate the magic” in the dignik doll?
- Bake Asilik Vasilik dolls using this [recipe](#). Have students reflect on the creation process.



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