Guidelines for Teaching about issue raised by Kony2012  
(Long Version)  
Developed by the Outreach Council of the African Studies Association

I. Introduction

A. Teachable Moment: The unprecedented attention generated by the Kony2012 video that has been watched recently by approximately 100 million individuals around the world provides a unique “teaching moment” for educators and students. As concerned Africanist educators associated with Outreach Council of the African Studies Association and the Association of Concerned African Scholars, we would like to share suggestions on how the educators can effectively engage and address the issues raised by Kony2012.

B. Welcome your knowledge and recommendations: In offering these guidelines we recognize that our classroom colleagues will bring to this issue a wealth of experience in engaging their students in meaningful learning activities related to controversial and difficult current events. We trust that teachers will provide us with critical and constructive feedback to the suggestions that we offer in this piece.

C. Affirming student engagement in social justice: There is no question that the Kony2012 phenomenon has elicited unprecedented interest among students in an important human rights issue. It is important for educators (university and K-12 based) to affirm student interest and engagement, even when raising questions regarding the Kony2012 video. Moreover, we believe that it is counter-productive for educators to impugn the motives or integrity of the producers of the video or of Invisible Children, the organization that sponsored the video.

II. Risk of accepting untested generalizations/stereotypes:

One of the potential dangers of students (or adults) viewing the Kony2012 video with little or no contextual knowledge of recent African history in general, and the situation in the Great Lakes region of east and central Africa in particular, is the reinforcement (or even creation) of stereotypical perceptions of Africa. As educators we need to encourage our students to engage issues through a process of critical inquiry that lessens the potential for accepting untested generalizations (stereotypes) as providing adequate explanation of a given issue. We are concerned that the Kony2012 video will reinforce stereotypical perceptions of Africa in at least three critical areas:

  a. **Violent crises are part of the “African condition”**: Firstly, that crises, particularly violent crises are endemic to Africa—almost genetically...
part of the *African condition*. There is, of course overwhelming evidence that challenges this perception.

b. **Africa is all the same**: Secondly, and related, that Africa is homogenous; and, therefore, that the *African condition*, which manifests along with the exotic, in primordial loyalties (*tribalism*), poverty, underdevelopment, corrupt and ineffective governments, and a tendency towards violence. Again, the evidence overwhelming challenges this perspective.

c. **Africa & Africans have little capacity to solve problems**: Thirdly, that Africa (as states, societies, economies) and Africans (as individuals and members of civil society) have little capacity to solve the problems confronting specific communities in Africa, including, as articulated in the Kony2012 video, the ability to deal with violent movements and their aftermath—and, consequently Africans are at the mercy of outside intervention. Since this issue is central to a critique of the Kony2012 video, it is important to point out recent examples of African initiatives to deal with violence and its aftermath from across the African continent:

- **Case of the women’s peace campaign in Liberia (West Africa)**. The campaign brought together women of all religions and all economic classes. A terrific video (HS & up) on it is "Pray the Devil Back to Hell"—available through our Center. Leymah Gbowee won the 2011 Nobel Peace for her work mobilizing and organizing women across ethnic and religious dividing lines to bring an end to the long and brutal civil war in Liberia, and to ensure women’s participation in elections of 2005 that elected Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, the first democratically elected female president in Africa.

- **The Gacaca Village Courts in Rwanda** which were established in 2001 as indigenous response to the need to “bring to justice” thousands of Rwandans who were engaged in the 1994 genocide. The Gacaca courts, adopting traditional Rwandan values, aim to establish a mechanism of *restorative justice*, with the primary concern of restoring community relations between perpetrators and victim, while holding perpetrators accountable for their crimes. While the success of *gacaca* at providing restorative rather than retributive justice is debated, the courts were clearly a creative local initiative.

- **The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), in South Africa**. Much has been written (including film/video) on the Truth and Reconciliation process in post-Apartheid South Africa. Important to our agenda, is that the TRC was an indigenous response to the horrific crimes that were committed in South Africa during the Apartheid era. While the TRC process was not totally successful in realizing the goal of national reconciliation, the process is highly regarded by most South Africans, and has been adopted by other nations (in Africa, Latin America, and Asia) as a model for establishing post-conflict restorative justice.
III. The core approach: critical inquiry:

As Africanist educators we have long embraced pedagogical methodology of critical inquiry. Historically the study of African history and contemporary issues in Africa have either been largely ignored or minimally taught resulting in ignorance and often gross misunderstanding of Africa. Use of critical inquiry in the study of Africa (as in the study of US history and, civics, geography, economics, etc.) can result in ameliorating this pattern. Consequently, we are convinced that educators need to bring the same commitment to the critical inquiry of the issues raised in and by the Kony2012 video.

A. Providing historical context: The Kony2012 video vividly depicts the atrocities of the Joseph Kony and the Lords Resistance Army committed over the past two decades. While these atrocities certainly took place and should be condemned, the video does not provide, nor does it suggest that it would be appropriate to explore, the historical context that gave rise to the Lords Resistance Army. Bringing in the historical context (including the legacy of colonial policy and practice) demonstrates that the LRA did not operate in a political vacuum, nor were they the only group engaged in violent activity. Ignoring the importance of historical context may lead students to think that evil actions have no social or political context; and worse, may reinforce an all too commonly held perspective that Africans are more prone to violence than other peoples.

B. Encouraging students to “complicate” their analysis: As educators we recognize that the world is complex and as such we encourage our students to “complicate” their analysis of important issues. This is certainly true when trying to understand the issues related to the atrocities committed by the Lords Resistance Army, and the inability of central African governments to arrest Kony. In response to criticisms of Kony2012 New York Times columnist Nicolas Kristof wrote a column in which he severely criticized the critics of Kony2012. One of the criticisms that he specifically addressed in his column was the critique that IC and the video presented a simplistic, a-historic perspective that ignored the complexity of the issue. Kristof, dismissed this criticism arguing that world governments often use the excuse of complexity to justify their failure to intervene in the face of severe human rights abuse including genocide. Recognizing that there are often terrible consequences for inaction and failure to intervene to end human right abuses, it must be pointed out the no one criticizing Kony2012 would argue that Kony and the LRA should not be brought to justice. However, as educators we teach our students that actions—including policies-of individuals and those of governments, institutions, and social movements—have unintended, and at time perverse consequences. Recognizing complexity and context helps structure actions that are less likely to have unintended negative consequences. Blindly supporting a call to
action in what is a good cause, may well result in making the situation worse for the people most impacted by the crisis. For example, the explicit advocacy of increased armed intervention by the Kony2012 video, ignores the reality that the Ugandan government with the support of the U.S. and neighboring countries has attempted at least three times in the past decade the use of their armed forces to capture Kony and other LRC leaders, with the disastrous consequence of dramatically increasing the suffering of the peoples of the region reflecting the African proverb that “when elephants fight it is the grass that is destroyed”. Contrary to what Kristof seems to be arguing that “the ends” (arrest/death of Kony) justifies the “means” (military intervention), as educators we—and our students—know from the study of history (including very recent global events) that following the dictum of “means justifying ends” can have disastrous, if unintended, consequences.

C. Encouraging students to differentiate between cause and effect:
Related to the imperative of recognizing and understanding contextual factors is the importance of distinguishing between cause and effect. Indeed, standards and benchmarks for the history and the social studies indicate the importance of students developing the analytical ability to distinguish between cause and effect. Related directly to the issues raised in the Kony2012 video, a central question for educators to investigate with their students: are the establishment and actions of the LRC symptomatic of social, economic and political variables in Central Africa? How we analyze potential actions, policies and solutions, should relate to how we perceive Kony and the LRC. If the LRC is viewed as on unexplainable phenomenon, or as explainable only as indicative of the African Condition—inexplicable tendency to violence (briefly discussed in the introduction), then attempting a military solution, might be the most logical response. However, if the LRC is viewed as symptomatic of larger contextual issues, then interventions that deal solely with the LRC are not likely to address the underlying issues that gave rise to the LRC. As Angelo Izama, an Ugandan journalist wrote in a recent New York Times op-ed piece, “Killing Mr. Kony may remove him from the battlefield, but it will not cure the conditions that have allowed him to thrive for so long.” Nor, would it address the issues of poverty and lack of opportunity among the youth of the region—the primary victims of LRC atrocities.

D. Importance of Timely and Appropriate Response: The Kony2012 video clearly advocates an immediate response from the millions of viewers. The desired response is the immediate capture (or death) of Kony. The video producers have been criticized for ignoring efforts by the Ugandan government (and efforts by neighboring countries) with US and other external support to defeat and dismantle the LRA. In addition to challenging IC (and other advocacy) groups to present issues comprehensively, we believe that Kony2012 provides us as educators the opportunity to critically examine the question of when and how the international community should intervene in crises in Africa and elsewhere. Clearly, there are times of crisis—natural disaster, genocide—that immediate action is essential; however, there are situations in which a more timely and thoughtful response is indicated in order to lessen the possibility of negative unintended consequences.
that may worsen the crises. As educators we can lead students in a discussion on how we can best judge the timeliness of outside intervention in a crisis—is immediate intervention desirable, or is a more deliberate process indicated? Relatedly, we should critically engage in a discussion of the type(s) of intervention that are most appropriate, most likely to produce the desired results with minimal negative consequences, in a particular context such as Central Africa.

E. Listening to Ugandan & African perspectives There is an old adage that history is written by the victors—the perspective or history of the defeated is often not heard or taken into account. Similarly, many recognize that the news that is available to consumers is filtered through the lens of the people who control the news media. The same is true for social media; without impugning the motives of the producers of the Kony2012 video or naysaying the possible positive impact of the video on our students, the voices and perspectives of the victims of the LRA are conspicuously absent. The absence of Ugandan and Central African voices/perspectives may well reinforce the negative and erroneous stereotype of Africans as lacking agency, of not having the will or capacity to act in their own best interest. Moreover, inclusion of these voices would not lessen the recognition of the horrific suffering of peoples in northern Uganda and neighboring countries as a result of the conflict between the LRA and the Ugandan army, rather, it would provide alternative perspectives (that are not homogenous or monolithic) as to the type of actions, that we and our students could enthusiastically support, that would result not just in the capture of Kony, and other war lords, but in the substantive improvement in the lives of the children in Uganda and neighboring countries. This, of course, raises the important questions of how we as educators, learners and engaged citizens can access local voices/perspectives. Fortunately, there have been many thoughtful responses to the Kony2012 video by scholars, journalists and ordinary Ugandans—including northern Ugandans—that have been posted on the internet that can be accessed by students.

F. Supporting open-ended evaluations of social justice organizations Educators and students are encouraged to be civically engaged as local, national and global citizens. The Kony2012 video provides an opportunity for educators and students to think about the process of selecting civic organizations with which work. When you're looking to support a civic or social justice organization, what are your criteria for supporting them? What criteria might make you want to know more? What would you be made uneasy by? How would you learn more?

These longer guidelines were developed as a companion to “React and Respond: The Phenomenon of Kony2012” on behalf of the African Studies Association Outreach Council by John Metzler (African Studies Center, Michigan State University metzler@msu.edu), with invaluable input from Barbara Brown (African Studies Center, Boston University bbrown@bu.edu) and Chris Root (Michigan State University and the Association of Concerned Africanist Scholars croot@msu.edu).