

## LEARNING EXCHANGE PROTOCOL

### The Power of Nommo in Learning Exchanges

Note: All protocols have multiple origins. The strength of a protocol is in the ability of facilitators or planners to adjust/revise for use in your context. <http://www.nsrffharmony.org/free-resources/protocols/a-z> is a good source of multiple protocols for school, district, community and organizational use.

Nommo<sup>1</sup> is an Afrocentric term used by Molefi Asante (and others) that identifies the **power of the word to generate and create reality**. Asante characterizes nommo as the process undertaken in community to foster transformation in that community by naming the current reality and re-imagining a future.

Nommo are the ancestral spirits of the Dogon (Mali) and are derived from a Dogon word meaning “to make one drink”. Nommo implies the power of words to create harmony and balance in the face of disharmony<sup>2</sup>. Although nommo is primarily a term that has been used to describe the African oral tradition, we use it to name the **power of the word in learning exchanges** as we continue to re-imagine our leadership roles as youth and adults in our organizations.

As with the African rhythm speech of call and response, nommo **calls on the speaker of the word and the listener to be in unity as they affirm each other’s reality**. The term reappears in discussions of the spoken word phenomenon of the ways that “artists are unlocking the keys to finding themselves and helping others experience what they have experienced”<sup>3</sup> (p. 245).

We affirm the power of all to assume responsibility for **breathing joy and justice** into our leadership roles in schools and communities. We see our role as re-interpreting the dominant narrative and by our repetition and affirmation supporting a different reality for our students, family and community. Each person in a group holds the reality of the other, and we support each other to unlock and name their experiences as a way of moving the work forward. By using these terms in our conversation, we give power and agency to the complex work of transforming our lives, organizations, and realities.

- Nommo substantiates the **power of language and story** to define and change reality.
- Nommo is a process of **speaking truth**. While some would say that you have truth and you drape it in words, Nommo comes from the perspective that words cannot be separated from form (or in the case of leadership, the leadership

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<sup>1</sup> Asante, M. K. (1987). *The Afrocentric idea*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

<sup>2</sup> Cummings, M., & Roy, A. (2002). Manifestations of Afrocentricity in rap music. *Howard Journal of Communication*, 13, 59-76.

<sup>3</sup> Walker, F.R. & Kuykendell, V. (2005). Manifestations of nommo in Def poetry. *Journal of Black Studies*, 36:2, 229-247.

practice) and that the form (and the actions) hold some truth about the work that is greater than is often seen.

- Nommo points to the **importance of speaking to a community** rather than to individuals. The point of Nommo, as described above, is to build community. Accomplished through a communal experience with the spoken word – the process of listening and speaking and co-creating through conversation a joint and shared re-imagining of reality.
- Nommo points to a “participation” of the community in the word rather than being passive listeners. The goal of Nommo is to bring about a **unified community** who are at one with the word that comes through repetition and in a form that is easily entered.
- Nommo is **holistic** (both-and) and not dualistic (either-or). It seeks to use the power of language to overstep dualities.
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### KEY CONCEPTS OF NOMMO

- Nommo substantiates the **power of language and story** to define and change reality.
- Nommo is a process of **speaking truth**. While some would say that you have truth and you drape it in words, Nommo comes from the perspective that words cannot be separated from form (or in the case of leadership, the leadership practice) and that the form (and the actions) hold some truth about the work that is greater than is often seen.
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### PROCESS

Each speaker offers an important learning in a brief word, phrase or sentence. This might be a quote from someone else. This might be a part of the framework that has become increasingly powerful for you or a commitment statement from the narrative you wrote. Here are two examples to start the process:

- From Audre Lorde: “When I dare to be powerful, to use my strength in the service of my vision, then it becomes less and less important whether I am afraid.”
- I promise to “share and analyze personal stories to create change.”
- I commit to being aware of the structural realities and renaming the reality I see each day.

After each speaker’s offering, the group affirms the speaker by **REPEATING** a mantra or saying (example below):

**WE BREATHE JOY AND JUSTICE  
INTO OUR SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITIES**

