Whitewashing American History:

Ain’t that the Truth?

Lorie Owens
Summer 2009

Dr. Beverly Gordon
EDPL 834

An Interpretive History of African-American Education
Part II: 1950 to the Present
Overview

It’s troublesome to consider the large swath American history that escaped my notice. I had been educated in highly respected parochial schools. My high school diploma came with the expected high SAT scores. It would not be until decades after receiving the alleged certification of my American education that I would discover I had been issued a false bill of goods. All that was troublesome about American history, all that may have cast this great country into a less-than-favorable light was largely excised, or as I prefer to put it, whitewashed. The concept of whitewashing takes me back to the penultimate American author, Mark Twain, who had one of his best-known characters, Tom Sawyer, invest a great deal of time in this relatively inexpensive yet effective “sprucing up” of a wooden fence. In much the same way that textbook historians covered over the ugliness of the sordid aspects of American history, so too did young Tom cover that unsightly fence. But wait—those of you who know The Adventures of Tom Sawyer know that he was too smart for that. He had someone else do it for him. And so begins the tale of the “someone elses” that textbook publishers swept past with the stroke of their whitewash brushes.

This brief arc of lessons originates from my perspective as a former high school educator whose classes comprised of “majority” students who preferred the whitewashed version of history and at times reveled in it. Their communities were primarily white and most of their knowledge of people of color came from the media or from their parents. I found their attitudes toward other peoples abhorrent and set about disrupting their comfortable whiteness. They wore their ignorance as a mantle. It
was my job to tear it off. As educators, we must help our students (regardless of color) to see past the whitewash down to the truth, however ugly it may be.

So I view these lessons through two lenses: one, a wide-angled lens to broaden the view of otherwise isolated and ignorant students of the “majority” who need desperately to see past their own noses, and two, a zoom lens, to focus in clearly on what matters, to honor OUR American history inclusive of African Americans, using methodologies that facilitate their own uncovering of new learnings.

In the rush to complete the scope of American history in one brief school year, significant aspects of our history ricochet past students as quickly as machine gun fire. Let us instead dig deeply into a few significant events in our history and uncover the truths that lie beneath. To uncover truths requires a lot of teaching with one’s mouth shut; the activities must engage the students in discovery learning.

For the purpose of this particular unit, students will investigate the desegregation of American schools with the option of a primary focus on the circumstances at Little Rock High School. In addition to the few history textbook pages devoted to the subject, students will examine primary sources of information on the “Little Rock Nine” and participate in several activities to uncover new insights and understandings.

Activities included in this short unit align with the following Ohio Academic Content Standards for Social Studies and for English Language Arts for the tenth grade:

- [SS] History, F10. 14b – Civil rights movement: changes in goals and tactics
- [SS] People in Society, B10. 4 – The struggle for racial equality and impact on
minorities since the late nineteenth century

- **[SS] Citizenship Rights and Responsibilities, A10.1c** – How pressure on the government shaped Civil Rights Legislation
- **[ELA] Research, 10b** – Evaluate usefulness and credibility of data and sources
- **[ELA] Writing Application, 10d** – Use documented textual evidence to justify interpretation of literature or to support a research topic
- **[ELA] Communication: Oral and Visual, 10e** – Give informative presentations that present ideas in a logical sequence, include relevant facts and details from multiple sources and use a consistent organizational structure

**Activities**


**I. Advance Organizer** - Cognitive

An advance organizer (AO) opens the topic for discovery. Students should engage in activity that leads naturally into the content which follows. When seeking deeper levels of knowledge, begin with the generalities and empower students with a degree of control over the subject matter.
Advance Organizer:

What constitutes the timeline for the American Civil Rights Movement?

Present students with three options for the start and end date to the American Civil Rights Movement.

1. 1945--1975
2. 1946--1956
3. 1954—1968

Working in groups of three to four students, each group using a computer with Internet access, have them:

• Identify the start and end date events (or several possibilities for each date) that could signal the beginning and end of the Civil Rights Era.

• As a group, determine which date set (if any) appropriately defines the American Civil Rights Movement. Support your choice with specific reasons.

• If none of the given timelines “fit,” propose a new timeline. Identify the events which the group sees as genuine indicators of the start and end of the Civil Rights Era. Support your choice with specific reasons.

Have groups present and defend their findings to the whole class.
II. Whose History?

Conduct a comparative study of the US History textbooks in area school districts. Consider the number of pages devoted to the Civil Rights Movement, the number of paragraphs devoted to the Little Rock Nine incident (or an incident of your choosing) compared to the total textbook pages. (Do not include unnumbered front matter or back matter such as glossaries, appendices and indices.)

Represent your findings in graphical form (table, chart, graph) and provide no less than one full page of discussion concerning the meaning you assign to the information uncovered.

SAMPLE GRAPHICAL REPRESENTATION:
III. Focus on Desegregation

Investigate an event related to the desegregation of American schools. Select from one of those listed below, or propose one of your own to your instructor:

- The 1954 Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka ruling
- Resistance in Little Rock, Arkansas, 1958
- 1964 Civil Rights Act
- Supreme Court’s 1971 decision, Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education

Begin with your American History textbook, then conduct a Google search and select several sources to examine. Working with *no less than four sources*, head to the CAFÉ to make your assessment.

**CAFÉ = Challenge, Adapt, File, Evaluate**

**Challenge**  Challenge information and demand accountability. Stand right up to the information and ask questions. Who says so? Why do they say so? Why was this information created? Why should I believe it? Why should I trust this source? How is it known to be true? Is it the whole truth? Is the argument reasonable? Who supports it?

**Adapt**  Adapt your skepticism and requirements for quality to fit the importance of the information and what is being claimed. Require more credibility and evidence for stronger claims. You are right to be a little skeptical of dramatic information or information that conflicts with commonly accepted ideas. The new information may be true, but you should require a robust amount of evidence from highly credible sources.

**File**  File new information in your mind rather than immediately believing or disbelieving it. Avoid premature closure. Do not jump to a conclusion or
come to a decision too quickly. It is fine simply to remember that someone claims XYZ to be the case. You need not worry about believing or disbelieving the claim right away. Wait until more information comes in, you have time to think about the issue, and you gain more general knowledge.

**Evaluate**
Evaluate and re-evaluate regularly. New information or changing circumstances will affect the accuracy and hence your evaluation of previous information. Recognize the dynamic, fluid nature of information. The saying, "Change is the only constant," applies to much information, especially in technology, science, medicine, and business.

(Harris, 2007)

---

**IV. In Her Own Voice**

Consider the Little Rock Nine incident from the point of view of one who was there. Together with your small group, take turns reading aloud from chapters in Melba Pattillo Beals’ *Warriors Don’t Cry* (1994). Take time to react to Beals’ words and the feelings she conveys. What must if have been like to be there?

Next, explore “The Little Rock Nine: 50 Years Later” on *The New York Times* website. Listen to the Melba Pattillo Beals and to the other women *in their own voices* relate their experiences. Whose message is most powerful to you? Why?

What aspects of these narratives are missing from your history books? Why do you think these details are omitted?

---

**Engagement and Participation Practices**

- Incorporate culturally established knowledge traditions—e.g., narrative, the oral tradition and Black rhetorical style (p. 71)

**Practices of Inquiry**

- Tap and develop the idea of collective memory; ensure a common understanding of the collective memory as how a people experience their present in light of the past (p. 72)
V. In the News

Review the press treatment of the incidents at Little Rock. (See Appendix A for Chapter 17 from your history textbook and a packet of The New York Times archived articles.) Divide the articles among a learning group. For each, take it “APPARTS” to dissect its meaning.

Consider the Author
Place & Time
Prior Knowledge
Audience
Reason
The Main Idea
Significance

1. Author – who wrote it? What do we know about this author?

2. Place & Time – where and when did the event take place? Where was the document published?

3. Prior Knowledge- what do you already know about this topic? How does it compare with the information in this document?

4. Audience – for whom was this document written? What can you assume about them? What are their interests?

5. Reason – why was this document written? Was accuracy a priority to its author?

Engagement and Participation Practices

- Question the assumption of the materials – in short, answer the usual questions seen as “troublesome” in the transmission model of education (p. ?)

Encourage Emergence of Identity-in-Activity

- Make explicit the importance of sustained interpersonal engagement so that the student shows increasing initiative in productive activity in the setting with increase in focus, energy and commitment (p. 71)
6. **The Main Idea** - what central idea does this document convey? What new information have you learned about the incident from it?

7. **Significance** – what is important about this document? What does it add to the material you’ve already read or experienced on the same topic? Is it worth sharing? Why?
Bibliography


Brown vs. the Board of Education. [http://www.civilrights.org/education/brown/](http://www.civilrights.org/education/brown/)


[http://www.virtualsalt.com/evalu8it.htm](http://www.virtualsalt.com/evalu8it.htm)


Appendix A


From the archives of The New York Times:

2. U.S. Court denies integration stay for Little Rock (September 8, 1957) 2 pages
3. Texts of Injunction curbing Gov. Faubus and law findings in Little Rock Case (September 22, 1957) 1 page
4. Faubus yields (September 22, 1957) 1 page
5. School is ringed (September 26, 1957) 2 pages
6. Faubus compares his stand to Lee’s (October 5, 1957) 2 pages
7. Little Rock Nine get racial honor (June 13, 1958) 1 page
8. New challenges OP-ED (August 24, 1958) 2 pages
9. Supreme Court postpones action on Little Rock case till Sept. 11 (August 29, 1958) 2 pages

Note: Each attachment is not paginated as a part of this document but appears after a titled cover sheet.
From the archives of *The New York Times*:

2. U.S. Court denies integration stay for Little Rock (September 8, 1957) 2 pages
3. Texts of Injunction curbing Gov. Faubus and law findings in Little Rock Case (September 22, 1957) 1 page
4. Faubus yields (September 22, 1957) 1 page
5. School is ringed (September 26, 1957) 2 pages
6. Faubus compares his stand to Lee’s (October 5, 1957) 2 pages
7. Little Rock Nine get racial honor (June 13, 1958) 1 page
8. New challenges OP-ED (August 24, 1958) 2 pages
9. Supreme Court postpones action on Little Rock case till Sept. 11 (August 29, 1958) 2 pages