

African American Literature: a Guide to Teaching Diversity

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Overview

Diversity is a fact in the United States. It is not a political point of view or a “liberal” way of viewing the world. Diversity describes who we are in America. To “teach diversity” is to immerse students in the realities of our pluralistic American society. Our diverse American realities include elements of race, ethnicity, religion, disability, gender, and sexual orientation – a plethoric landscape of difference. As an American people, our private individual and group realities converge in public to form a common, civic culture. Generally speaking, the purpose of a shared civic culture is to form and maintain political structures that help protect the right of individuals to pursue happiness. A shared American culture, at its best, helps protect the freedom to practice our diverse individual and group ways of life. Our shared civic culture neither assimilates nor discriminates. Rather, the American culture protects that which makes the culture uniquely American: a peaceful, perpetual liberal democracy made up of all possible types.

Perhaps the most important public place where we rehearse our shared culture is the public school. The public school is dually important because it both incorporates and creates the shared American culture. The public school has a dual function; like the county courthouse, the public school is a public place where people from a variety of backgrounds gather to perform a particular function – in this case, to educate citizens. One of the functions of the school within the broader goals of education is to help form a shared civic culture. I would argue that the public should be considered the most

important public place in our society because the public school does much more than, say, the county courthouse in developing the shared culture. Not only are students exposed to people in public schools who are unlike them in various ways (as they would likely be at the courthouse), they also have the opportunity to study various elements of diversity from a disinterested academic stance (something they probably would not be able to do in the courthouse if they were so inclined). In a sense, the public school is a meta-culture; that is, it is a culture about studying culture. In school, one has the opportunity to study what makes up the shared school culture in which they are participating daily. To be clear, students do not have to be aware that they are learning in a meta-cultural structure in order to gain the benefits of a public education. But the public school nonetheless provides the most accessible and likely venue for teaching shared civic values.

Teaching diversity in the public classroom starts with tolerance, a fundamental element of shared civic culture. Tolerance, however, should not be the ultimate goal. To say we tolerate a particular way of life connotes that we are willing to be silent about something that makes us uncomfortable and that we have not made a serious effort to understand. What educators should be working toward in teaching diversity is developing empathy for others and cultivating a shared understanding of the human condition. Developing understanding for fellow human beings should never be sacrificed, I would add, in favor of the STEM subjects amidst a panic that American students are “behind in math and science.” Federal agendas aside, many subjects within the humanities and social sciences lend themselves to teaching empathy and

understanding the human condition. The humanities, in particular, are about studying humans as such through primary works of humanity – through novels, letters, poems, and language. For the purposes of my one unit project, I have chosen American Literature as the vehicle for teaching diversity (literature was a natural choice for my project, not only because of the insight it provides into the human condition but because of my graduate training in English Literature). Through literature, teachers help students move beyond mere tolerance toward developing empathy and understanding. The careful study of literature is part of a good liberal arts education, which should start at the high school level and develop in college. A liberal arts education, however, does not have to be limited to college prep curricula. That is to say, the study of literature is valuable not only to students who are headed to college but to anyone who works with people in any capacity in any field, professional or otherwise. Anyone can employ the critical, analytical, creative, and adaptive thinking skills that are developed and sharpened by studying literature.

It is important that educators examine and reexamine teaching practices and exercises. It is risky, at the level of generalization, to refer to large categories of difference because there is always further division and difference within each group that we identify. One of the difficulties of teaching diversity is that each person is different; group labels are, in a sense, artificial constructions of language. As educators, we must help students understand that each primary text they encounter has the potential to speak to the human condition but does not necessarily speak for an entire group of people. With that disclaimer in mind, the unit I offer in the following section

focuses on the literature of African-Americans. African-American culture is one of many that has shaped our broader, shared American culture. Again, no unit or course can cover the depth and breadth of any given culture, so as educators we must always teach with the goal of helping students see with a critical eye; Frederick Douglass spoke with a voice that represented an entire people, but his is still one voice. With a critical eye, we avoid stereotypes.

Teaching diverse elements of our shared American culture is not a new practice, nor is teaching African-American literature in public schools. The latest *Language Arts Graded Course of Study* (2003) from Worthington (Ohio) City Schools contains the following guidelines for 11th grade American Literature:

In American Literature students develop an appreciation of the literature of the United States from the Colonial days to the twenty-first century.

Either chronologically or thematically, students read different genres including novels, short stories, nonfiction, drama, and poetry. Students read critically, write a variety of types of papers, recognize literary trends and appreciate the diverse American culture. Content covers authors and selections which represent various cultures that contributed to the literature of the United States including African American, Asian American, Hispanic American, and Native American. Evaluation may be based on a combination of group projects, quizzes, tests, written assignments, oral presentations, and class participation.

As I said above, there is a risk in teaching diversity in terms of defined groups of people; we can never perfectly capture a given group, and we will always make some assumptions that do not apply to everyone. Further, our shared culture includes much more than “African American, Asian American, Hispanic American, and Native American.” With a good liberal arts education in her pocket, a high school or college graduate can apply the critical, analytical, creative, and adaptive skills she has learned and apply them to study cultures, various groups of people, or individuals that she meets that were not “covered” in a given class. After all, a one semester course in American Literature can only cover so much.

I want to turn now to an example of a high school American Literature course, with the aim of expanding the existing texts, resources, and activities available for teachers. Gavin Meeks’ 2007-2008 American Literature course, taught at Worthington Kilbourne High School in the Worthington City School District, demonstrates how literature is taught in the public high school within the framework of the graded course of study referenced above. In addition to tests, quizzes, and journal writing, Meeks expects his students to engage in “discussions, debates, speeches, group activities-film clips or videos, presentations” and “interviews.” In addition to its structured activities, Meeks’ course offers a particularly good example of teaching diversity through a variety of primary texts. Meeks employs a variety of methods to engage students with primary texts, and each activity he assigns can be used effectively to teach literature. Meeks’ course can be used as an outline for teachers to create their own courses in conjunction with the resources I’ve made available in the next section.

Finally, a healthy, liberal democracy depends on well-educated citizens. For a shared culture to survive, we cannot live in ignorance of one another. The following activities are designed to help teachers achieve the mission of the public school system, which is in part to teach diversity for the greater project of forming a shared civic culture. Indeed, a school is not a school at all if it does not teach diversity.

Resources for Teaching

Using the above principles as a guide, I present two groups of resources for teaching below. The first is a unit of five activities that can be used with any combination of early or contemporary African-American literature and poetry. The activities are designed to fully engage students with the texts they read. With the literature assignments, I tried to encourage creativity without allowing the activities to stray too far from the material of the text. I stayed away from quizzes or similar activities; quizzes can be helpful tools in gauging whether or not students are keeping up with their reading, but they do not always aid in the development of critical, analytical, creative, and adaptive thinking skills.

In a one semester American literature course, a high school teacher has to cover a tremendous amount of material, and there is no shortage of resources to help teachers develop their courses. With this in mind, I put together the second group of resources in two parts: a list of selected Web resources and a short list of African American literature anthologies and collections. The Web resources include research guides, bibliographies, online literature collections, and links to databases. I selected the web resources with

the idea in mind that teachers could consult academic criticism of African American literature and see how the canon has evolved. In districts that are more flexible than others, teachers will be able to use the resources I provided to engage with newly “discovered” authors. One might start with, say, Douglass, DuBois, Haley, Morrison, and Wright and then compare the canon to less “established” texts. The anthologies I list are fairly standard (Oxford, Norton, Prentice Hall), and I included an anthology on poetry and one on women’s literature. A teacher could conceivably create a three tiered literature unit, one focusing on short stories and novels, one on poetry, and one on women writers.

African-American Literature Unit

Activity One: Reading Poetry with Music

The best way to understand a poem is by reading it aloud, but sometimes students are less than enthusiastic about reading aloud in class. For this activity, each student selects a poem or series of short related poems to read aloud in class. As part of the project, each student also finds instrumental music contemporary to the period in which the poem was written (the teacher can also make a variety of music available and the students can use the music provided). The poem can be chosen from any number of canonical or non-canonical works. The students each read their poem over the background music. The goal of the exercise is for each student to interpret the poetry using her own interpretive voice. The reading is then followed up by a discussion of the poem and a brief explanation of her reading by the student.

A variation on this activity is to select a few students to provide background music; if there are musicians that are skilled enough to play various styles of music you can give them a few genres and have them rehearse outside of class or you can have a few students provide percussion for the poetry. Or you can allow the students to choose whether they will use live music or recorded tracks.

A few things for students to consider: How did you choose your particular poem and music? How did a particular style of reading influence the meaning of the poem? Does speed, cadence, volume, and tone matter? What if it were read another way? How did a particular style of music influence the meaning or feeling of the poem? What if another type of music were chosen?

Activity Two: Write a Short Story or Series of Short Poems

Another method of dissecting and understanding a text is to write your own version. For this activity, students choose an author to emulate. The goal is for the student to identify thematic and/or stylistic qualities of a particular author or work. This activity is meant to challenge the student by asking her to look at communicating an idea or set of ideas from someone else's point of view. Students should consider what the author was trying to communicate, why the author chose to express particular ideas or themes in particular ways, and why the author chose the short story or poem as a means of communication.

Activity Three: Expository Essay

For the expository essay, students choose a novel from an “approved” list and write about an issue they found interesting in the text. Students should address the following questions: What did you find interesting in the text? What idea(s) did you discover that someone else might not necessarily agree with? What do other people have to say about the issu(s) you raise in relation to your chosen text? For the expository essay, students should incorporate at least three secondary sources.

Activity Four: Three-Sided Debate

For the debate, students choose one of three critical readings of a text. The teacher offers three conflicting interpretations of a section of a novel, short story, or poem, and students defend their chosen side. Students should be encouraged to carefully consider all three readings of the text so that they can form reasonable counter arguments to their own position. The debate activity helps teach civil discussion and argumentation, public speaking, and careful consideration of another’s viewpoint. The point should be made clear that, even though the 24-hour news cycles present two sides to every issue, there are often multiple ways of interpreting a text (and multiple interpretations that are defensible).

Activity Five: Analyze Two Views of the Same Subject

For this activity, a student might compare Thomas Jefferson's writing on slavery with slave narratives, for example. The point of this activity is not to argue for a particular point of view on any subject (the paper that argues "slavery was wrong" will not be a controversial one), but to examine how two people from two perspectives can have dissimilar experiences about the same thing. This activity further nurtures empathy and understanding of the human condition through close examination of primary texts. Again, the point here is not to look at an issue from the perspective of right or wrong but to critically assess a given writer's perspective on a topic.

Selected Web Resources

<http://guides.library.yale.edu/content.php?pid=66696&sid=580357>

<http://library.princeton.edu/catalogs/articles.php?subjectID=2>

<http://library.sbc.edu/guides/africanamerlit.html>

<http://pegasus.cc.ucf.edu/~janzb/afphil/afamres.htm>

<http://vos.ucsb.edu/browse.asp?id=2845>

<http://www.coe.uga.edu/~smago/VirtualLibrary/Stripling.pdf>

<http://www.csustan.edu/english/reuben/pal/append/black.html>

<http://www.lib.uconn.edu/research/guides/AfrAmLit.pdf>

<http://www.library.wvu.edu/ref/subjguides/africanamericans.html>

<http://www.suffolk.edu/sawlib/speccollafoam.html>

<http://www.tcnj.edu/~meolam/afam.pdf>

http://www.umass.edu/umpress/fall_04/bell04.html

<http://www.wsu.edu/~campbelld/amlit/afambib.htm>

<http://www2.lib.udel.edu/subj/blks/resguide/afrlit.htm#bibliographies>

Selected African-American Literature Anthologies and Collections

Hill, Patricia Liggins (Ed.). (2003). *Call & Response: the Riverside Anthology of the African American Literary Tradition*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

Gates Jr., Henry Louis and Nellie Y. McKay (Eds.). (2003). *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company. (2nd ed.).

Lee, Valerie. (2005). *The Prentice Hall Anthology of African American Women's Literature*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Marable, Manning and Leith Mullings (Eds.). (2009). *Let Nobody Turn Us Around: An African American Anthology*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc. (2nd ed.).

Rampersand, Arnold (Ed.). (2005). *The Oxford Anthology of African American Poetry*. Oxford: Oxford UP.

Works Cited

Meeks, Gavin. American Literature Syllabus (2007-08). Found online at:

<http://www.worthington.k12.oh.us/schools/wkhs/syllabi0708/English/Meeks%20Am%20Lit.pdf>

Worthington Schools Language Arts Graded Course of Study. (2003). Found online at:

<http://www.worthington.k12.oh.us/uploads/2/File/documents/langartsgcos.pdf>