Teaching about Slavery Using the WPA Ex-Slave Narratives

by
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While content standards for each Social Studies discipline are being debated and instituted, many teachers who have developed successful "posthole" inquiry units fear that teaching to benchmarks will force inquiry learning to the margins of their curricula. In order to defend successfully the centrality of *inquiry* within our courses we need to stake out ground now and dig in when we adopt assessment strategies. History teachers need look no farther than the National History Standards (1996) for the rationale to justify inquiry-based units. To teach students "Historical Analysis and Interpretation Skills," for example, we must require them to become historians (p.26).

We all know that students do not learn to become historians by reading textbooks. Textbooks are synthetic narratives. The authors of each history textbook select evidence to construct

their own interpretations. Ultimately we have learned to select documents for our students and walk them through the process of learning how to think like historians. The first lesson we teach our students is that historians can disagree about analysis and interpretation based on similar sets of documents. In the language of the National History Standards' objective 3a, students must learn to "Compare competing narratives" (p.27). The pedagogical problem posed by this objective is, How will students be able to assess competing narratives? Fortunately, the problem of access to documents has been lessened somewhat by the availability of documents online. As a result, many teachers are now constructing units that allow students to become historians by requiring them to access document sources on the Internet.

The availability of over fifty of the Works Progress Administration's Ex-Slave Narratives online allows history teachers to require their students to become historians of slavery. The WPA Ex-Slave Narratives were compiled between 1936 and 1938 to recover the memory of the slave experience. Over 2,300 former slaves from every Southern state were interviewed by journalists employed by the WPA. These interviews were transcribed and form much of the document base upon which historians of Southern slavery have based their interpretations. Ideally, teachers should draw from the complete set of narratives compiled by George P. Rawick in, The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography, Forty-one volumes (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1972-1979). Because these narratives represent and invaluable resource, they should be a part of every school library. If the bound narratives can not be accessed, teachers and students can review over fifty of the WPA Ex-Slave Narratives at the web addresses listed in the bibliography. Doubtless, all of the 2,300 narratives will eventually find their way onto the Web or a CD-ROM.

Before students dive into the narratives, I like to create a context for understanding and analysis. In order to measure initial student understanding, I ask students to make a list of facts they know to be true about American slavery along with the written sources of those facts. Then I ask them to list the visual images that come to mind when they think about American slavery and to couple those images with their sources as much as possible. I ask students to compare the two lists. My students have typically listed many more images and television sources than facts and

written sources. When written sources are mentioned, they usually refer to textbooks or general reference works used for reports. Most of the visual sources discussed are movies like "Amistad" or PBS documentaries, with an occasional reference to "Roots" or a television docudrama. What I try to stress to my students at the end of our discussion is that they each have, as potential historians, predetermined biases about the subject of American slavery before they begin their research. I then ask them to write a paragraph about how they would try to remain objective when given an opportunity to examine a significant number of documents.

When students have completed their paragraphs, I give them an opportunity to share their paragraphs as an entry point in the "objectivity" debate. Students who agree with the statement that objectivity is possible are asked to convene in a group or two and jointly write a position paper that defends their position. Those students who disagree with the statement do the same. During the next class period, position papers are presented, followed by a discussion about why objectivity is problematic. Most students end up concluding that the degree of objectivity is partly determined by the nature and number of sources available. Almost all students tended to agree that historians must be very conscious of their preconceived biases when they examine and analyze documents and formulate interpretations.

During a third class period, I make a presentation on the most important sources for American slave historiography. The presentation is prefaced by the question, How can we best examine the American slave experience? Students are quick to point out that two major sources are the papers and letters of slave owners and the slaves themselves. At this point I describe the nature of the available sources. Excellent examples of published slave narratives may be found at:

- Professor Steven Mintz's Website (http://vi.uh.edu/pages/mintz/primary.htm),
- The Norton Anthology of African American Literature (Gates and McKay, eds., 1997),
- John W. Blassingame's Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies (1977).

Slave narratives published under the auspices of abolition societies are carefully distinguished from oral histories.

At this juncture I introduce the WPA Ex-Slave Narratives. Students are told that most of the ex-slaves were in their seventies and eighties when they were interviewed and that they were therefore children or very young adults when they were slaves. Without critiquing any potential sources, I then ask students to create a chart listing the major source categories such as a slaveowner's papers, contemporary formal slave narratives and autobiographies, contemporary newspaper stories, interviews, oral histories, and the WPA Ex-Slave Narratives. These categories are placed at the top of the chart's vertical columns two categories, strengths and weaknesses, form the horizontal columns.

I then divide the students into groups of four to consult and fill in their charts. After critiquing potential source categories for fifteen minutes, each group makes its report followed by class discussion. Students are quick to see the potential bias in each source category. In preparing for this discussion, I consult Blassingame (1977 and 1979), and Parish (1989) in order to fill in gaps in student responses.

The shortcomings of the WPA Ex-Slave Narratives as sources include: 1) direct memory of a limited time frame—the 1850's 2) possible embellishment or erosion of memory 3) the color and demeanor of the interviewer in some cases skewed responses, and 4) bad questions angling for confirmation of the interviewer's ideas about slavery.

The next step, of course, is to ask students to read twenty to thirty of the WPA narratives. The advantage of working from the forty-one volume series is that the teacher can randomly select thirty to forty narratives for student use and thus achieve a somewhat representative sample. If on the other hand, students read from the Internet sites listed below, their exposure was narrower because the narratives were pre-selected.

In preparation for reading the narratives, I have students construct another chart. Along the left margin students list the names of the ex-slaves and the states and counties where they were held in bondage. Across the top of the chart, students write column titles, "Size of Farm or Plantation," "Nature of Relationship Between the Owner and Slave," "Relative Autonomy of Slave Life," and "Reliability of Narrative." I then describe what each category means. For example, with the second category, I tell students that I want to know whether the owner knew the slave by name,

whether the owner used more harsh punishment than incentives, or whether the owner tried to be consistent and rational or tended to be moody, harsh, or impulsive in his treatment of slaves. For the "Autonomy" category I ask students to look for descriptions of time away from the overseer or owner. I ask for example, the extent to which slaves were permitted to hold meetings or travel to do "piecework." Were slaves permitted to grow their own gardens? Were slave marriages and families recognized and respected? Were they allowed their own religious and social gatherings? Were slaves on one farm permitted to socialize with slaves from other farms or free African Americans? Students are also asked to comment on the reliability of each narrative by judging its internal consistency. They are asked to screen them for obvious exaggeration or omission in stories.

Finally, students are instructed to focus only on those portions of each narrative that deal with the slave experience. Many of the narratives contain a great deal of valuable information on liberation during the Civil War and descriptions of Klan activity during Reconstruction. While these stories are fascinating and can be used for future assignments and activities, students should stay focused on the nature of the slave experience prior to "freedom."

Several factors impact the length of time I give students to complete their slave narrative charts. If we are working in a computer lab, we might be constrained to one or two days and therefore students will read fewer narratives. When my students worked from the bound Rawick volumes, I allowed them three class days to complete their charts. On the third day I assign a homework task. I asked students to make a list of generalizations about slavery based on the evidence that they read. I explained that a generalization is a description of what appears to be a pattern. I told students who did not see any patterns to write about why no patterns were perceived based upon the evidence that they examined.

On the next day I asked students to present their generalizations and the evidence that they drew on to support their theories. Most students reported significant variations in farm size and in the relationships that existed between the owner and slaves. Many students reported a pattern of more autonomy on some large plantations. Ironically, some students

reported that although farmers who owned fewer slaves knew their slaves on a more personal basis, many of these slaves had relatively less autonomy. What really came through in our discussions was that the slave experience was incredibly varied and that generalizations are difficult to identify and support. On the other hand, most students found much of the narrative content to be compelling and reliable. They typically reported that they found the logic of the stories to be internally consistent. They were most impressed by the vivid concrete details that were used to describe slave life.

It was my experience that two prevalent myths were dealt serious blows as students encountered the narrative evidence. The first is the "Gone With the Wind" myth and its big house on the plantation. Students learned that, although the plantation image held true for some farms, especially as slave ownership became more consolidated in the 1850's, many slaves worked on medium and small sized farms. The second idea that students begin to call into question after reading the narratives was the image of the sadistic Simon Legree planter who enjoyed beating his slaves. Undoubtedly there were Simon Legrees. However, the picture that emerged from the evidence was that slave owners were businessmen who wanted to profit from their investment in slave labor. Because they were interested in the long-term profitability of their investment in human bondage, most owners wanted their slaves healthy enough to work. Most planters saw their slaves, to use Leslie Owen's phrase (1978), as a "Species of Property." Of course, this colder, more calculating image of the slave owner also deals a serious blow to the master as father and slave as child notion that many Southerners have been brought up to believe.

I concluded the unit by presenting two of the most prominent theories of the slave experience. I gave students two brief excerpts from the work of Elkins (1959) and Genovese (1976). The readings provided students with mutually exclusive pictures of slave life and as "competing narratives" this activity addresses one of the important objectives of the National History Standards. Elkins believed that the "Sambo" stereotype of the childlike slave was a reaction to a concentration-camp-like existence that did not allow the slave an autonomous identity or community. In other words, slaves regressed to "Sambo" because they were brutalized and infantilized. Genovese, on the other hand, maintained that slaves pre-

served their own identities by resisting the control of the planter to carve out autonomous communities that preserved cultural traditions and encouraged new forms of expression. After reading these excerpts, students were asked to debate the issues raised by the "competing narratives."

As a culmination to the slave unit, I assigned an essay that required students to take one of three positions—the perspective of Elkins, the perspective presented by Genovese, or a middle ground perspective. In making their cases, students were asked to consult their charts. Students are also asked to respond to a second question that asked them how they would go about seeking to prove or disprove Elkins or Genovese if they had access to all of the available evidence.

Using the WPA Ex-Slave Narratives in the classroom allowed my students to examine a sample of the evidence that historians have used to construct competing synthetic narratives. Bringing documents into the classroom permitted students to become historians, to tap into the "fun" of research. By using the major document bases that historians use, we as teachers can guide our students through the process of historical thinking. Students are better able to understand slavery, for example, to the extent that they can begin to hear the voices of slaves and imagine a world in which the River Jordan was the most significant place.

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INTERNET SOURCES FOR THE WPA EX-SLAVE NARRATIVES

"Been Here So Long" –Selections from the WPA Slave Narratives
http://newdeal.feri.org/asn/asn00.htm

American Slave Narratives, An Online Anthology (Index of Narratives)
http://xroads.virginia.edu/~hyper/wpa/index.html

George P. Rawick Papers Slave Narratives—Missouri
http://www.umsl.edu/~libweb/blackstudies/moslave.htm

Biography

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