



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1991 Volume III: Afro-American Autobiography

“Douglass, Booker T. and W.E.B.” A Study of Black Educational Theories

Curriculum Unit 91.03.05
by Deborah Hare

My curriculum unit examines some of the educational views and experiences of African-Americans. This study begins with *Narrative of the Life of a Slave* by Frederick Douglass. It focuses, however, on the famous educational debates between Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois. This curriculum guide attempts to show the progression of black education from learning to read during slavery to admission to prestigious private schools. This paper includes autobiographies, poems, and plays in an attempt to present a manageable curriculum guide that traces the chronology of the struggle for black education. In this manner students can better gauge their own place in this struggle and perhaps develop more understanding and respect for themselves and their struggle. An additional outcome of this guide might be in helping students explore educational opportunities and ideas relevant to them in this chaotic world.

Frederick Douglass was a remarkable person, born, as closely as he can figure, in February 1818. He lived on a plantation as a slave. His father was white and rumored to be the “master” of the plantation. He saw his mother only four or five times in his life. His first autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of a Slave*, tells about a variety of his experiences as a slave, including the harsher than normal treatment he received because of his mixed parentage. The book details much of the violence he witnessed, the different people he worked for, and the different places he lived. It is a short, comprehensible book for high school students. It is a good idea for a classroom teacher to bring the class together as a group first before attempting to teach emotionally difficult material.

Douglass is such a terrific role model for kids. He was bright, motivated, and brave. He was also a philosopher, bringing great meaning to the use of songs and music by slaves and a psychological insight into the cruelty and violence associated with slavery. For purposes of this guide, however, I will concentrate on Douglass’ desire to learn.

Douglass was fortunate to be traded from a cruel plantation owner to the Auld family when he was seven or eight. He looked upon this as one of the most interesting events in his life. “It is possible, and even quite probable, that but for the mere circumstance of being removed from that plantation to Baltimore, I should have today, instead of being here seated by my own table, in the enjoyment of freedom, and the happiness of home, writing this Narrative, been confined in the galling chains of slavery.” Douglass felt this way because of the wife of his new master. Her name was Mrs. Auld, and she is described in the book as “unlike any other white woman” he had ever met. She was kind, good-hearted, and she began to teach him to read. She got as

far as the alphabet and a few short words before her husband found out. “Mr. Auld found out what was going on, and at once forbade Mrs. Auld to instruct me further, telling her, among other things, that it was unlawful, as well as unsafe, to teach a slave to read.” Douglass quotes Auld’s own words by saying “If you teach that nigger (meaning me) how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave.” It is through this exchange between husband and wife that Douglass begins to make the necessary political and sociological connections he needs to begin his journey from both mental and physical slavery. “I now understood what had been to me a most perplexing difficulty—to wit, the white man’s power to enslave the black man. It was a grand achievement, and I prized it highly. From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom. It was just what I wanted, and I got it at a time when I the least expected it. Whilst I was saddened by the thought of losing the aid of my kind mistress, I was gladdened by the invaluable instruction which, by the merest accident, I had gained from my master. Though conscious of the difficulty of learning without a teacher, I set out with high hope, and a fixed purpose, at whatever cost of trouble, to learn how to read.” It is this attribute of Frederick Douglass’ that I find the most inspiring and would, I hope, inspire my students as well. Douglass lived with these people for the next seven years, had no regular teacher, and was carefully watched to make sure he was never reading a book. He explains some of the ingenious methods he later develops to learn to read. “The plan which I adopted, and the one by which I was most successful, was that of making friends of all the little white boys whom I met on the streets. As many of these as I could I converted into teachers.” When Douglass was sent on errands he brought pieces of bread with him and gave them to the hungry little boys in return for pieces of knowledge from them. Eventually what Mr. Auld feared came true, for the more Douglass read, the more he began to “abhor and detest” his enslavers. He even goes so far as to say, “As I read and contemplated the subject, that very discontentment which Master Hugh had predicted would follow my learning to read had already come, to torment and sting my soul to unutterable anguish. As I writhed under it, I would at times feel that learning to read had been a curse rather than a blessing.” This quote is very provocative and would make an excellent writing assignment for the students. Douglass’ narrative goes on to show other methods he used to learn to write (rather in Huck Finn style), and his time spent teaching other slaves in secret how to read and write. This knowledge literally helped Douglass escape slavery, and we can only be grateful that such a great mind found its way to expression.

Frederick Douglass’ autobiographical tale is particularly inspiring to me because he felt that education was his way out of slavery. There are also many thought-provoking questions for study in the book. I include a few from my own reading here:

1. Why does Frederick Douglass feel that learning to read is a curse as well as a blessing? What book have you read that has changed your world view or turned your life around in some way? What does the phrase “ignorance is bliss” mean to you?
2. What significance or point of view does Douglass have about why the slaves sing?
3. In what way is alcohol used to further enslave the slaves?
4. In what ways does Douglass show that slavery had ill effects on everyone—both master and slave?
5. Why did Douglass dream more about escaping during happy, peaceful times than miserable, unhappy times?

Up From Slavery, Booker T. Washington's second autobiography, published in 1901, is a particularly appealing segue. Washington, at least from my reading of his autobiography, seems a mild mannered and flexible man especially when juxtaposed with Douglass. He is, perhaps, as motivated, but less angry and bitter. He began his life as a slave as well, in West Virginia, and, like Douglass, is not sure of his birthday. He guesses it was in 1858 or 1859. They are both examples of the lack of birth identity that is one legacy of slavery. This would be a good time to assign a short essay entitled "Why my birthday is important to me." Like Douglass, Washington became obsessed early in life with school. "I had no schooling whatever while I was a slave, though I remember on several occasions I went as far as the schoolhouse door with one of my young mistresses to carry her books. The picture of several dozen boys and girls in a schoolroom engaged in study made a deep impression upon me, and I had the feeling that to get into a schoolhouse and study in this way would be about the same as getting into paradise."

Washington maintains this view of education as paradise throughout his life. Like Douglass he uses his work, in this case numbered salt barrels, to learn numbers and math. Not going to school was frustrating for him because as he says in his autobiography, "From the time I can remember having any thoughts about anything, I recall that I had an intense longing to learn to read." It was at this time that the first school for negro children opened near his hometown. A young man was hired from Ohio and this caused great excitement. "This experience of a whole race beginning to go to school for the first time, presents one of the most interesting studies that has ever occurred in connection with the development of any race. Few people who were not right in the midst of the scene can form any exact idea of the intense desire which the people of my race showed for an education." It is quite possible that this early excitement and intense desire that Washington observed led him to open Tuskegee Institute.

Booker T. Washington's road to Tuskegee was not an easy one. It began when he overheard a conversation while at work in a coal mine. He heard about a school for "coloured" boys in Virginia, that let students work off part of the tuition in trade. "As they went on describing the school, it seemed to me that it must be the greatest place on earth, and not even Heaven presented more attractions for me at that time than did the Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute in Virginia." Washington found his way there, worked hard, both in school and as a laborer and graduated with honors. The hard work Washington did at the school formulated one of his strongest educational views. "I have no patience with any school for my race in the south which did not teach its students the dignity of labour." Writing Assignment: Based on your reading of *Up From Slavery* why does Washington glorify manual labor? What types of manual labor did students at Tuskegee do?

After graduating from Hampton and traveling a bit, Washington moved back to his hometown. There, he continued to formulate his educational views. "The idea was too prevalent that, as soon as one secured a little education, in some unexplainable way he would be free from most of the hardships of the world, and, at any rate, could live without manual labour. There was further feeling that knowledge, however little, of the Greek and Latin languages would make one a very superior human being." This exaltation of manual labor forms the basis of Washington's philosophy that a students should not only be taught to think but to be able to perform a service needed in the community as well.

The person he credits with changing his life and having the greatest influence on him was the head of the school, General Armstrong. Washington's contact with him proved to be a turning point as Armstrong would later recommended Washington to a group of southern whites as the man they needed to start a school for negroes in Alabama. Keeping his educational views clearly in mind, Washington set out to accomplish this task of opening a new school. This school became Tuskegee Institute and was founded on Washington's views of the glory of manual labor combined with good old-fashioned book learning. Washington moved to Alabama

and observed the town. “After spending a month in seeing the actual life of the coloured people, I felt that in order to lift them up, something must be done more than merely to imitate New England education as it then existed.” To start the school he worked with the new students growing crops, making bricks and erecting buildings. From this experience Booker T. Washington became clear about his mission. “I wanted to teach the students how to bathe, how to care for their teeth and clothing. I wanted to teach them what to eat and how to eat it properly, and how to care for their rooms. Aside from this we wanted to give them such a practical knowledge of some one industry, thrift and economy, that they would be sure of knowing how to make a living after they had left us. We wanted to teach them to study actual things instead of mere books *alone* .”

I underline the word “alone” because it is with this word that I think Washington’s goals were most misunderstood. There are rumors that he didn’t allow chemistry books or the Greek classics on campus. That is, in my humble opinion, hogwash. I congratulate him for recognizing what is always most necessary for advancement—economic opportunity.

Up From Slavery was a very enlightening experience for me. I am glad I read it after I became a teacher because now that I have teaching experience my educational theories have changed. A few short years ago I think I would have disagreed with him, but now, watching my students graduate without hope of a job, I have come to believe that exalting manual labor, or any kind of labor that is needed in the community, is the correct path. I had a discussion last week with one group of students who told me they saw no value in their high school education at all. Almost all the students in the class were going to high school to please their parents. None of the students felt that the education itself was of value either personally or professionally. They also told me they hate the emphasis high school teachers put on “going to college.” It adds stress to their already stressful life and takes away the pleasure of their accomplishments in the present. I totally agree. These revelations are striking for a number of reasons. One is that high school has, in large part become (or always was) irrelevant to many students. I wish there were more emphasis on vocational training for all students so that they could get jobs, or make career changes later in life. It would also decrease the frighteningly snobbish attitude that those who work with their hands do not deserve respect. I do not want to be mistaken here as spouting the view that college is wrong, but rather that college is not for everyone, nor is it the answer to all of society’s ills. In many ways it is a scam, one that young people literally cannot afford to participate in anymore. I would rather see more emphasis on improving the quality of high school (an education that would include the greek classics as well as vocational training).

There is at least one major thinker who disagrees with me. That man is W.E.B. DuBois. DuBois, who was born in Massachusetts in 1888, received a Ph.D. from Harvard in 1895. John Edgar Wideman, author of *Brothers & Keepers* wrote the current introduction to the famous autobiography by DuBois *The Souls of Black Folk* . In this introduction he states that DuBois’ autobiography is the most important book about post Civil War American History, and that the quote by DuBois, “the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line,” changed the way he viewed life. DuBois is indeed a deep and controversial thinker, and although he admired many things about Booker T. Washington, (“One hesitates therefore to criticize a life which beginning with so little, has done so much.”) he disagrees with his views on black education and calls him the great compromiser. “Mr. Washington represents in Negro thought the attitude of adjustment and submission.” It is this attitude of submission that seems to bother DuBois the most. Washington’s ability to compromise led him, in DuBois’ view, to restrict black education and to remain narrow. DuBois feels that equality among the races could only come from equality in education and by allowing black minds to soar along with white minds. “Is there not infinitely more danger to be apprehended from half-trained minds and shallow thinking than from over-education and over-refinement? Surely we have wit enough to found a Negro college so manned and equipped as to steer successfully between the dilettante and the fool. We shall hardly induce black men to

believe that if their stomachs be full, it matters little about their brains.” DuBois felt that Tuskegee offered only half the picture and that it only half educated its students, making them care only about the economic qualities of an education rather than the depth of thought that a different education could give them. He further felt that Washington’s focus on vocational training limited the Negro’s thinking and self-esteem and provided a work force for Southern whites. DuBois wanted to see in a university “the determination to realize for men, both black and white, the broadest possibilities of life.” He further feels that the function of a university is “not simply to teach bread-winning, or to furnish teachers for the public schools or to be a centre of polite society; it is, above all, to be the organ of that fine adjustment between real life and the growing knowledge of life, an adjustment which forms the secret of civilization.” DuBois further poses a thought-provoking question for students: How foolish to ask what is the best education for one or seven or sixty million souls. Shall we teach them trades, or train them in liberal arts? Neither and both is his answer. He explains this later by saying that the final product of our training must be neither a psychologist nor a brickmason, but a man. And to make men, we must have ideals, broad, pure, and inspiring ends of living—not sordid money-getting. The worker must work for the glory of his handiwork, not simply for pay.”

Both men had conflicting, yet good, educational theories, that had much to offer. The following poem would be a terrific one to use in a classroom for it tries to show, in a humorous way, the difference in thinking between the two men. It is a good follow-up to the readings and makes an excellent jumping off point for a structured and organized writing assignment.

Lesson plan activity Read the following poem “Booker T. and W.E.B.” by Dudley Randall. Based on your reading of chapters 3, 4, 5, 6 in The Souls of Black Folk , and Up From Slavery write a brief synopsis of both Washington and DuBois’ educational views, considering what issues the poem touches on. What point is the poem trying to make? and c) which view do you like better? why?

Booker T. and W.E.B.

By Dudley Randall

“It seems to me,” said Booker T.,
“It shows a mighty lot of cheek
To Study chemistry and Greek
When Mister Charlie needs a hand
To hoe the cotton on his land,
And when Miss Ann looks for a cook,
Why stick your nose inside a book?”
“I don’t agree,” said W.E.B.,
“If I should have the drive to seek
Knowledge of chemistry or Greek,
I’ll do it. Charles and Miss can look
Another place for hand or cook.
Some men rejoice in skill of hand,
And some in cultivating land,
But there are others who maintain
The right to cultivate the brain.”
“It seems to me,” said Booker T.,
“That all you folks have missed the boat
Who shout about the right to vote,

And spend vain days and sleepless nights
In uproar over civil rights.
Just keep your mouths shut, do not grouse,
But work, and save, and buy a house.”
“I don’t agree,” said W.E.B.,
“For what can property avail
If dignity and justice fail.
Unless you help to make the laws,
They’ll steal your house with trumped-up clause
A rope’s as tight, a fire as hot,
No matter how much cash you’ve got.
Speak soft, and try your little plan,
But as for me, I’ll be a man.”
“It seems to me,” said Booker T.—
“I don’t agree,”
Said W.B.B.

My idea for teaching a course in African-American educational theories is to read and compare different writers. Depending on the length of time a teacher has with a particular class, more writers could be added to this curriculum. A good place to continue some of the themes would be to compare Langston Hughes' autobiography *The Big Sea* and Richard Wright's autobiography *Black Boy*. Both of these books are immensely readable and offer two paths toward self-actualization. Wright's *Black Boy* shows the anger brought out by racism and the effect that has on a person. It also illustrates the black migration from the South to the North. Hughes, a more lyrical, poetic writer finds a softer, easier life filled with wanderlust and interesting people. Read in conjunction these two books would greatly enhance ones understanding of black education.

As my curriculum guide, unfortunately, does not properly represent women an excellent place to continue would be to compare Lorraine Hansberry's *To Be Young, Gifted and Black* with the recently published *Black Ice* by Lorane Cary. Cary's book takes us into the world of the exclusive private school. In her autobiography she describes some of the thoughts and feelings of being one of the first females and first black students at St. Paul's School in New Hampshire. Her book examines whether or not the purpose of black education is to mimic white education.

It is my hope that this curriculum unit will give students a variety of role models who have used education for personal and professional advancement. It will also introduce students to some of the great African American thinkers of the 19th and 20th centuries. It will also, one hopes, act as a road map for the intense decision making required of students during their senior year in high school.

STUDENT ACTIVITIES

I have found that taking my students to the library is a wonderful way to spend a few hours. At H.S.C. we have three hour block classes so I am easily able to do this. Students discover the joy of researching in a quiet, pleasant environment. This activity develops students library skills, and it acquaints them with the key people in the course so that they will have a working knowledge of who they are.

1. Field trip to the New Haven Public library. Research and write a summary paragraph on the following people: William Lloyd Garrison and "The Liberator", W.E.B. DuBois, Booker T.

Washington, Frederick Douglass.

2. Students will analyze Booker T. Washington's "Atlanta Exposition" speech. They will then write their own speech on education mimicking the voice of Washington, DuBois or Douglass.

3. Who Am I?

Students will select paragraphs or sentences from the assigned readings, and write them on a separate piece of paper. They will then read them out loud while the rest of the class guesses who wrote it. In this way students will become more familiar with the different personalities, and how they think.

4. A second library trip would involve having students research black colleges, including Tuskegee, Hampton Institute, Fisk, and Lincoln. I will provide them with a list. They are to pick 5 and write brief summaries. The summary should also compare and contrast the schools as well as familiarizing students with them both academically and geographically.

5. Students will watch “Ragtime” which dramatizes the historical time period of these great thinkers. Booker T. Washington appears as a character in this film and shows how he was caught in a conflict between submission and activism. Students will then write a two page movie review.
6. A third field trip will take us to a senior citizen’s center where we will interview the people about their educational experiences. Some of the questions would include: How far did you go in school? What did you get out of school? How has life itself educated you? Looking back on your school years what did you enjoy the most? Would you have done anything differently? What advice do you have for high school students?

STUDENT BIBLIOGRAPHY

Robert Sam Anson, *Best Intentions* . This is a non-fiction account of the death of Edmund Perry, a young black man taken out of the streets of Harlem and transferred to Phillips Exeter Academy in New Hampshire. Perry, back home on vacation, is involved in a robbery and is shot by a policeman. The book raises many thought provoking questions, especially the role environmental influences have on us.

Maya Angelou, *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings* . This is a lyrical and delightful autobiography. It is easy to read and students love it. Maya Angelou is a dynamic woman who is a writer, director, dancer and poet.

James Baldwin, *Go Tell It On The Mountain* . Baldwin’s autobiographical novel is very readable. Many of the students will be able to relate to his struggle with the church, personal identity, and his harsh relationship with his father.

Ernest Gaines, *The Diary of Miss Jane Pittman* . This is another autobiographical novel that is especially good for students because it traces the history of the civil rights movement from slavery to the space program at Cape Canaveral. The video is also excellent.

Zora Neale Hurston, *Dust Tracks on the Road* . Zora’s autobiography is an excellent choice for high school students. In it she traces her early development in an all black town through her years at Barnard studying anthropology and her role in the Harlem Renaissance. Zora was a true maverick, ahead of her time and an excellent example of a free spirit who took risks to support her creativity.

Mary Mebane, *Mary* . This moving autobiography traces a young woman’s journey from her childhood in North Carolina through college and self-identity. It is particularly thought-provoking in that it shows her lack of self-esteem due to the color of her skin and her mother’s jealousy of her success.

Ntozake Shange, *For Colored Girls Who Have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf* . This semi-

autobiographical play by Shange is a wonderful way to express the joys and pains of being black and female in America.

Mildred Taylor, *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* . This book would make an excellent choice for a student who is looking for extra reading or a student who enjoys reading fiction more than non-fiction. It is an immensely readable story of Cassie who comes of age in the 1930's. It shows her discovery of racism and her life in Mississippi.

John Edgar Wideman, *Brothers and Keepers*. This is a non-fiction account of Wideman's own family particularly his brother who is in prison for murder. Wideman explores the role of environment plays in shaping personality and ponders why he earned a Ph.D while his brother became a convict. It is an interesting view of two different paths out of the ghetto.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Cary, Lorene. *Black Ice* . New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991.

Comer, James. *Maggie's American Dream* .

Douglass, Frederick. *Narrative of the Life of a Slave* . New York: Signet 1968 (originally 1845).

DuBois, W.E.B. *The Souls of Black Folk* . New York: Avon Books, 1965.

Hansberry, Lorraine. *To Be Young, Gifted and Black* . © 1969 by Robert Nemiroff as executor of the estate of Lorraine Hansberry. Signet Press Publishers.

Hughes, Langston. *The Big Sea* . New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1940. Washington, Booker T. *Up From Slavery* . New York: Avon Books, 1965.

Wright, Richard. *Black Boy* .

<https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu>

©2019 by the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, Yale University

For terms of use visit <https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu/terms>