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Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative

2024 Volume II: A History of Black People as Readers: A Genealogy of Critical Literacy

The Why and How of Reading: Literacy Skills from Primary Sources

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This unit guides students in analyzing five instances of historical, activist literacy: Frederick Douglass learning to read in the 1830s, the Philadelphia Institute for Colored Youth beginning in the 1840s, student writings from the Carlisle Indian School in the 1880s, the founding of Third College by the Lumumba-Zapata Coalition in 1970, and the beginning of Black Lives Matter at School Week of Action in the late 2010s. In each case study, students use a mix of primary and secondary sources to identify specific reading skills demonstrated by the readers and writers of the past and apply Gholdy Muhammad's five pursuits of skills, intellectualism, identity, criticality and joy. This unit also reviews basic literacy concepts such as phonics and fluency, for both teachers and students, and would work well in a late middle school or high school context where many students are reading below grade level. During their study of these successful readers under fire, students will generate their own personal syllabi, combining a variety of texts in order to chart a personal path towards improved literacy and intellectual self-development during and after high school.

(Developed for English I, grade 9, and English IV, grade 12; recommended for English, grade 8; English I, grade 9; and English IV, grade 12)

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