YALE NATIONAL INITIATIVE
to strengthen teaching in public schools®

Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative
2020 Volume I: American History through American Lives

In Their Own Words? - Using The WPA Slave Narratives in the Classroom

Curriculum Unit 20.01.05, published September 2020
by Mark A. Hartung

Introduction

The history of slavery IS the history of the United States. As such, it is imperative for our students to learn, even while being challenging to teach. Students participating this unit will use biography in the form of oral histories to investigate the history of slavery and the experience of enslaved persons. Rather than rely on textbooks and what other people want students to learn, I want students to develop their own learning by reading and hearing the words of enslaved persons themselves, in their own words. However, the words students often read in biographies are not necessarily the direct words of the people in question. Sources can and should be questioned for accuracy, context, bias, and more. While on the one hand an important resource and a source worth studying, the WPA Slave Narratives - created by the United States government in the 1930s to record the experiences of slaves directly from former slaves themselves – are in fact not necessarily the words of former enslaved persons. How and why this came to be is worthy of study as well.

I currently teach at Hoover Middle School in San Jose, California. Students from the downtown area make up a diverse student body of approximately 1,100. Roughly 67% of our students are from low-income families and approximately 30% are identified as English Language Learners. The majority are students of color with Hispanic students making up roughly 80% of that total and ~10% are other students of color. Although this unit is written with my students in mind it is broad enough to be adapted for other classrooms looking to learn about the history of slavery and the use and analysis of primary sources.

Because my students are predominantly from minority and immigrant families they are especially attuned to the idea of individual rights and the inequality of the society in which they live. University of Northern Iowa Professor Paul Horton notes that students at this age group are especially receptive to the history of struggles in others because they are developing "their own moral compass."[1] I see this in my students as well. Because of this, exploring part of the story about how our current unequal society was created will increase student engagement. Slavery of course played a huge role in creating that unequal society. The idea that my students are looking at real people, speaking (more or less) directly to them, will also increase engagement over and above what a traditional textbook driven approach would.

My students will be investigating both the historical record of and about enslaved persons and also the issues surrounding the use of historical sources. In taking part in this unit my students will strengthen their ability to

use multiple historical thinking skills, focusing mainly on historical significance (how and why do we decide to focus on certain events), change and continuity (how issues can evolve over time and yet remain relevant), and the ethical dimension of historical choices and events (how does a study of history help us to live in the present). These historical thinking skills will be practiced throughout the unit as students interact with a number of primary and secondary sources.

There will be two main sections to this unit. Initially, students will focus on the slave narratives created by the federal government during the New Deal in a program known as the Federal Writers Project (part of the WPA, I will refer to these sources collectively as the WPA Slave Narratives). These narratives attempt to show the experience of enslavement in the enslaved persons' own words, and focus on learning about history through the lives and words of the participants themselves. After we have looked at several narratives and done some comparisons together as a whole class, I will then ask the students what they really know about the sources they are using. This will lead into the second main idea of the unit, which focuses on examining sources with a critical eye. I often tell my students they are developing historians, and all historians must practice and learn the skill of examining a source with a critical eye and understanding the context of its creation.

Content Matter Discussion

WPA Slave Narrative Overview

The benefits of using primary sources have been much discussed and well documented. Primary sources allow student to engage directly with the artifacts of history, to build skills of analysis and communication, and to draw conclusions about how and why some items are included in the historical record and some are not. Historian Cynthia Lyerly notes that the WPA Narratives as primary sources allow for students to "…think critically about sources, look for biases, to do close readings, and to balance their research in primary sources with readings in the scholarly literature."[2] So what are the WPA narratives and why do they make such a good resource for classroom use?

The slave narratives in question came into being as a part of one of several New Deal programs that eventually evolved in the Federal Writers Project (FWP), part of the Works Progress Administration, or WPA. Started in 1934 as the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, this was a government jobs program designed to provide employment for white-collar workers including writers. At first the focus was on state and local histories, racial groups, folk cultures and more.[3] The goal was to create a large scale "American Guide, a geographical-social-historical portrait of the states, cities, and localities of the entire United States."[4]

When the state of Florida submitted a collection of oral histories from former slaves, the national level administrators decided that this was a strategy that should be pursued by as many states as possible. Associate director George Cronyn sent a memo to thirteen state-level directors discussing the Florida submission and noting that the "documentary records by the survivors of a historic period in America are invaluable…" The FWP encouraged and directed all states to begin interviewing formerly enslaved people.[5]

Over the next several years interviews were conducted with roughly 2,300 formerly enslaved persons. In 1941 a set of edited transcripts was put together and microfilmed. Initially published in a seventeen volume work titled *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States from Interviews with Former Slaves* the

narratives were digitized (along with roughly 500 visuals) and now reside on the Library of Congress' website allowing for easier access and making use in the classroom much easier to manage. The narratives and associated materials are organized by state and are accompanied by several paragraphs of historical overview, some articles and essays about the project in general, and a guide to using the materials.

The combination of the ease of use and the lure of a wealth of first person accounts of slavery in the United States makes one wonder how any teacher could resist using these materials in the classroom. However, as with any primary source there are considerations that must be evaluated. Should these materials be used in the classroom? And if so, how should they be used? There are both benefits and drawbacks to the WPA Slave Narratives. My unit describes how they can be used successfully in the classroom, but only by examining the pros and cons can teachers make a thoughtful choice about including these materials in their course of study.

Benefits of the WPA Slave Narratives

As stated above the benefits of using primary sources in the classroom are numerous and widely accepted. These specific materials allow students to read about the experience of formerly enslaved persons in language that makes it personal and immediate. Everyone can readily agree that slavery was (and is) a horrific institution that has left a deep stain on the history of the United States. Reading about slavery in a standard textbook however, gives one an impersonal overview of the horrors.

A teacher in Lake Oswego, Oregon, quoted in an article about teaching slavery that appeared in *The Atlantic* puts it well. She states that students come into her class 'knowing' about slavery but in a way that is "dull, lifeless, and bored. It has the feel of something memorized and rote, rather than something internalized and meaningful."[6] The article goes on to note the importance of using primary sources to counteract this phenomenon, though it does not explicitly mention the WPA collection.

As an example, the phrase 'people were whipped' does not have the same impact as the statement of Sallie Crane, a real person who recounted her own experience during the WPA interview process: " I been whipped from sunup till sundown. Off and on, you know. They whip me till they got tired and then they go and res' and come out and start again. They kept a bowl filled with vinegar and salt and pepper settin' nearby, and when they had whipped me till the blood come, they would take the mop and sponge the cuts with this stuff so that they would hurt more."[7] She goes on for several sentences describing *her* whippings, not the fact that nameless or faceless people were whipped. The first person accounts bring history to life, even (or maybe especially) a painful history like this.

In addition to painting a vivid picture for students, the collection is vast and varied. Roughly 2300 narratives are organized by sixteen states. The narratives include stories from both men and women and from different geographical areas. Interviews were conducted in Southern and Border states, as well as New York and Rhode Island. Along with the interviews are additional materials such as advertisements of slave auctions, photographs of the formerly enslaved persons, and drawings of different methods of keeping track of slaves, bills of sale, and runaway notices.[8]

Zooming out just a bit, one can find uses for this set of primary sources that are not directly related to the experiences of formerly enslaved persons. Almost every primary source can tell several different stories at once, if the historian is open and willing to listen. The WPA Slave Narratives are not an exception.

A great example of using the WPA Slave Narrative as a primary source for a different topic comes to us from Historian Stephanie Shaw. While noting that the narratives are sometimes discounted because it can be

difficult to gauge how truthful and accurate the responses are, Shaw focuses on the fact that these interviews were conducted during the Great Depression, and can be used as primary sources to learn more about that era in history. She notes that looking at the narratives for their perspectives on the 20th Century can yield new and important information about the role of gender and age in the Great Depression, the labor history of the 1930s, and can even prompt some important questions into the Great Migration of African-Americans from the rural south to the urban north in the first half of the 20th century.[9]

Many of the issues with the narratives stem from the recollections about positive aspects of slavery, which some historians have difficultly accepting (this will be discussed in more detail later). Shaw, while acknowledging the complex nature of the narratives and the stories they tell, focuses on the idea of time rather than status. She uses several examples of formerly enslaved persons speaking in somewhat positive terms about their past. Parker Pool for instance states that "I think some o' de slaves wuz better off when dey had owners and wuz in slavery den dey is now." Shaw notes that the important word in that quote is the word "now" and her claim that the Pool is not commenting on the condition of slavery as much as he comments on his current state within the Great Depression. She mines the narratives for evidence that the formerly enslaved persons are in fact worse off "now" but that is because of the Depression not because of their status of free versus enslaved.[10]

Another alternative use of these narratives is to look at race relations in the United States (especially the South) during the 1930s. Consider the analysis that a student can undertake into the mindset of both whites and blacks in America during the Jim Crow era by studying the responses. When one takes into account that most of the interviewers were white, the questions of race relations and integrity of response take on new meaning. According to historian John Blassingame "The contemporary state of race relations almost always affects what blacks are willing to tell whites."[11] Regardless of how forthcoming the interviewee may or may not have been the exchange can shed light on the relationship between black and white Americans during this period of history.

This unit is certainly written with the use of the narratives in mind, and therefore it is no secret that this author finds the benefits of the narratives outweighing the drawbacks. There is another benefit that will be discussed below, and that has to do specifically with how this unit will use the narratives in the classroom. Prior to that discussion however, it is useful to look at some of the scholarship about the shortcomings of the WPA Slave Narratives and their use in the classroom.

Drawbacks of the WPA Slave Narratives

Transcription and Editing of Narratives

A wide variety of historians and other scholars have written about the uses and shortcomings of the WPA Slave Narratives. Although the summary that follows is as comprehensive as this format will allow, I would encourage any teacher to consider the following overview just that, an overview, and to do their own research prior to using this collection in their own classroom.

Writings by Cynthia Lyerly are useful because she writes from the perspective of someone who does use the narratives while also acknowledging their drawbacks. The first issue that she describes is that the narratives are not verbatim recordings of what was said in the interview. Interviews were transcribed, sometimes after the fact, and editing could and did occur on both the state and federal project level.[12] This observation can be found in most of the scholarship about these narratives. Clearly this causes one to pause when considering

the narratives as a primary source within the classroom. If the goal is to present the recollections of formerly enslaved persons in their own words we quickly find out that this goal may not be achievable. Does this mean one should not use the narratives within the classroom? That will be discussed in more detail later on.

Blassingame elaborates on the problem of transcription by noting that the editors came to the task from different backgrounds with wide variations in education, religious beliefs, literary skill and attitudes towards slavery. He claims that all of these differing attitudes could well have affected how the editing was completed.[13] He shares the example of an interviewer working in Georgia in 1936 and 1937, J. Ralph Jones. Jones submitted five interviews to the state office during that time, three of which were transcribed but are "virtually identical" to the records that Jones kept for himself. The other two however are both much shorter and, according to Blassingame, distorted. The interviews were edited to remove references to slave punishments that were cruel, stories about runaways, and stories about blacks serving in the Union Army and voting during Reconstruction. Also the WPA transcript leads the reader to believe that the interviewee spoke in dialect ("de", "dis", "chilluns", etc.) but the records kept by Jones indicate that the interviewee spoke in "excellent English." [14]

Exacerbating the problem of accurate transcription, historian Lynda Hill notes that many of the administrators were more interested in the aesthetics of the stories told and that expectations were based on the racial stereotypes of the 1930s that also affected the editing process. She cites one example where the appraisal sheet found with the interview notes that the stories told seem 'improbable' and that the tone seems 'foreign' to a black storyteller. [15] This demonstrates how the bias of the mostly white administration of the FWP played a role in judging, classifying, and filtering the information that comes to us now through this source. This necessitates on the part of the classroom teacher a judgment about how 'primary' these primary sources are.

Race Relations – Interviewers and Interviewees

In the Lyerly article the second drawback that she raises is the race of the interviewers. Most scholars that write about the WPA Slave Narratives join her in noting that most of the interviewers were white, and often they were white women. Lyerly specifically mentions the difficulties that the formerly enslaved person would have had with sharing intimate details about slavery with a white woman during this time of Jim Crow laws and open racism and claims that this would produce answers that the interviewee thought the interviewer wanted to hear, producing responses that were not necessarily one hundred percent truthful.[16]

Blassingame confirms the Lyerly assertion with some additional detail. He notes that in some cases the white interviewers were from families whose ancestors had owned the ancestors of the people being interviewed. The race of the interviewers stoked fears of violence as well. In the years from 1931 to 1935 he notes that there were more than seventy lynchings in the South. Of those, nine were blacks that had committed no crime at all, and twenty-five were for only minor offenses (though he does not elaborate on what those offenses might have been). He goes on to say that many of the interviewees lived in areas where labor contracts were being negotiated in prison cells, debt was continual, and travel was still restricted. In addition he quotes historian Pete Daniel in saying that the violence of the era sent "tentacles of dread throughout the entire black community." [17]

In her work *Long Past Slavery* historian Catherine Stewart writes about the racial makeup of the WPA interviewers. She also notes that the social and political environment affected almost every aspect of daily life and would have affected the interview process as well. She states that white interviewers were patronizing and/or paternalistic, used caste system titles like 'Auntie' and 'Uncle' and used questions that were at times

leading, or insulting, or both. Because of this many narratives from the WPA project refer to the 'good old days' of slavery and talk about the many kindnesses conferred by masters/owners.[18] Blassingame goes further noting that the WPA interviewers consistently talks about the interviewees as "…aunteys, mammies, and uncles" and other much harsher and derogatory terms of the era.[19]

Some black interviewers did participate however, predominantly in the states of Florida and Virginia. While acknowledging that side by side comparisons are difficult if not impossible (the organization and labeling of the narratives makes it difficult to identify the interviewer most of the time, let alone race) every historian commenting on this topic that I have accessed states that the formerly enslaved persons were much more forthcoming about all aspects of slavery when they were not talking to a white person.

White interviewers used a heavy phonetic dialect, which Stewart refers to as "minstrel-like" such as the phrasing of the Jones interviews referenced above. According to Stewart, Black interviewers almost never used this style, and when they did it was with a "much lighter touch." The general portrayal of slavery differed significantly as well. Stewart notes that when looking at white interviewers product positive descriptions of slavery abound. She notes that black interviewers on the other hand were able to record more graphic stories of abuse, mistreatment, and slave resistance.[20]

Choice of Questions

In addition to the race of the interview there are also concerns about the types of questions asked. Both Lyerly and Blassingame describe the use of leading questions and provide examples of this as well and Lyerly notes that the interviewers were "…interested in some things about slavery and not in others." She gives two examples of leading questions in discussing the interviews of Henrietta McCullers and Delia Garlic. Although the questions are not included in these specific interviews (a shortcoming also common to the WPA Narratives) Lyerly notes that both women respond in such a way to indicate that they were asked about the 'good times' during slavery. Garlic replies "No'm, dey warn't no good times at his house" and proceeds to recount two examples of violent acts that she endured at the hands of slaveholding women when she was a child.[21]

From an interview that takes place in Georgia Blassingame provides us with a progression of questioning that appears to be in response to a description of a cruel and hard master. This is apparently not what the interviewer wants to hear. Blassingame recounts the exchange between the interviewer and Nancy Boudry in his article. Not hearing the answers wanted, the interviewer tries to steer the interviewee towards more positive memories with phrases like: "Nancy, wasn't your mistress kind to you?" and "But the children had a good time, didn't they?"[22]

Advanced Age and Memory

In the 1930s the typical formerly enslaved person was in there 80s, sometimes even older. Lyerly claims that this fact has two implications. The first being that these people interviewed would have been very young when they were slaves. She asserts that young slaves, by and large, were treated better and had more to eat because their parents or other older enslaved persons would have been looking out for them.[23] This could certainly help to explain some of the positive memories of slavery that exist within this collection.

She also notes the debate among historians that centers on the reliability of memory in older people. Again, almost all scholarship consulted for this unit mentions the issue of asking 80+-year-old people to remember

something accurately that was happening while they were children. Historian Donna J. Spindel provides us with some additional data. She writes that the age range of the interviewees was from 72 years to 108 years, with more that two-thirds of the interviewees 80 or older. This means that the information collected assumes that these octogenarians had a reliable long-term memory.[24]

Spindel takes the reader on a tour through some scholarship about the study of long-term memory to comment on the reliability and usefulness of the WPA Narratives. Her conclusion however, is that the scholarship is inconclusive. She does note, however, that even as the narratives were being recorded and edited in the 1930s that memory was a concern. The Virginia state-level director felt that much of the information that had been collected should simply be discarded. She is quoted as questioning the experience of a "man of eighty [who] remembers the exact dimensions of slaves' houses and the exact sizes of windows; yet he was only a child when he lived in the cabin." [25] As with all of the drawbacks discussed, these are legitimate concerns that should be considered prior to using the narratives in the classroom. They are not, however, reasons not to use them as will be discussed further on.

Geography and Sampling Concerns

Another drawback that is raised by many scholars discusses the geography and sampling issues of the narratives. Historian Jeff Strickland summarizes the concerns by noting that only about two percent of all still living formerly enslaved persons were actually interviewed. Roughly one third on the interviews come from Arkansas, while only 3.5% of slaves actually labored there. Other historians support this by noting that many of the slaves interviewed were living in states they moved to post-slavery. Strickland contends that the Border States were underrepresented and that no interviews were conducted in Louisiana. In addition to the geography issues, he also notes that the interviews collected information from more men than women, more house servants than field hands, and more a population that was more urban than rural.[26]

In looking at the organization of the narratives online one can find few, if any, interviews conducted in the North. In Ohio there are eight records, Indiana six, and Rhode Island only one. Even allowing for the fact that the Great Migration was perhaps in its early years (beginning with the labor shortages of World War One) one can assume that there were more than fifteen formerly enslaved persons living in the North in the 1930s. This apparent neglect of collecting the stories of formerly enslaved people in the North may be due to the fact that the project grew out of efforts to create an "American guide" and that the Florida interviews were the early model. It does, however, suggest a biased mindset towards slavery being a Southern issue. Blassingame comments that the population that moved North may have been on the whole more adventurous and least satisfied with their lives, leaving the Southern population as an "atypical sample."[27]

Classroom Uses of the WPA Slave Narratives

Introducing Students to Narratives

The first look that students will have at the narratives will be done in a whole class setting. I will give them very little background information about the WPA or the FWP at this point, since I simply want their reactions to the information that is placed in front of them and would like for students to spend some time investigating the experiences of these formerly enslaved people. For this part of the unit we first look at the narratives of Peter Bruner and Aunt Adeline. This choice gives my students a bit of variety and the use of the Bruner narrative sets them up for some more detailed investigation farther along. Bruner was from Kentucky and his description of his experience is almost universally negative. Adeline was interviewed in Arkansas where her

master moved her from Tennessee at the age of one. Her recollections are more varied, and there are some positive comments about slavery that she shares. At this point my students will not know how to interpret them, that comes later, but I want them to find and discuss the range of experiences.

As a whole class we will review the Bruner narrative and I will model for my students how to record his memories in a graphic organizer that collects the major recollections found within. Believing that each teacher knows their students best, I have not included a specific organizer for teacher use, any number of options could work well. Students will then be asked to review the Adeline narrative using the same format/organizer in either pairs or triads. This activity will be wrapped up by having students share and comment about the significance of the specifics found in these two narratives.

Following this, I will put the students into triads for some additional investigation. (As of this writing in 2020, I do not know exactly how this will work over distance learning. It will take some experimentation and trial and error. Most of the activities that I describe in this unit are intended for in-person classroom use, so some adaptation for distance learning would be required.) Once the students are in their groups I would distribute additional narratives to each group and have them investigate a common set of questions. Students would then create displays that show the experience of their own research.

The narratives that I have chosen for this assignment are listed in more detail in the sample student activities below, but they vary in length and location and I attempted to find from unique narratives as well. For instance, one of the formerly enslaved persons interviewed in Florida was once the slave of a South Carolina Governor, so students can compare her experience with that of someone with a more 'typical' master/owner. In other case I found an interview that had the questions included, which can also be useful in discussing the questions in more detail as described below. Teacher wanting to use this unit are encouraged to find variety to present to students whether they use my resources or find their own from this collection.

Because I am teaching Middle School, I will be excerpting some of the narratives for my students. I don't want to change the narratives themselves, but they need to be appropriate in both length and content. Many of the narratives include language that is today seen as offensive, and teachers will need to make their own decisions about how best to handle that language.

Once the displays are completed, a gallery walk could be used so that students could note the variety of experiences that made up the slave experience and hopefully conclude that it was not a monolithic experience. Students could then report want they have learned in a variety of ways. This allows students to both teach each other and learn from each other in a collaborative manner. The goal is for students to investigate, find, and then share the wide range of experiences that the narratives show.

Questioning the Sources

Now that the students have pulled some details from these narratives and spent time learning about the personal effects of the institution of slavery they will discuss the source itself. How did we get these stories and how do we know that they are reliable (or are they reliable)? For this part of the unit I will have them access the Library of Congress website and do a quick scavenger hunt to fill out information in a form that I will supply. Again, I believe that working with a partner or in a triad is useful, but each teacher can make that decision. At this point the goal is just to learn the basic facts about the narratives: Who? What? When? Why? How?

Once students have had some time to collect details, they should discuss them. For this effort I would put

pairs or triads together into larger groups and have them share the details that they found. Once finished they would need to answer some basic questions about the sources including 1) How old are these sources? 2) Are they really primary sources about slavery (compare the dates of the 13th Amendment with the date of the WPA project)? 3) How reliable is memory (ask students to list the last five meals served in the cafeteria, or the last five Netflix shows they watched, or some other list that students would consider non-threatening. 4) What questions were asked during the interviews? – this last question is intentionally leading – they may have some guesses but won't know the specific questions. This will lead into a discussion about how the questions might affect the answers, something they will learn more about next.

As a wrap up for this section I would give my students a short homework assignment. Choosing a fairly recent event that most people will have lived through, I will ask them to interview a family member about it. We will brainstorm three to five questions that students can ask, and then they will be instructed to choose only three out of the five so that not every student asks every question (since not every WPA Interviewer asked the exact same questions). In the next class period these answers will be reviewed and compared, leading into a discussion about interviews and memory as historical sources.

Review of Scholarship on Benefits and Drawbacks of the WPA Slave Narratives

Now that I have introduced some level of doubt into their minds, they will look at the scholarship about the WPA Slave Narratives and create an overview of the challenges and benefits based on what they find. I would suggest the Lyerly chapter and the Blassingame articles would be useful sources to use as a starting point, both give a brief overview of the challenges. For the benefits side of the equation I would show students the beginning of Norman Yetman's article titled *Ex-Slave Interviews and the Historiography of Slavery* and some of Escott's *Reflections on "Slavery Remembered."* In addition, I will discuss the benefits of primary sources with my students in general such as the article from *The Atlantic* that I referenced above.

Because of the grade level that I teach I will be excerpting these articles (but not otherwise altering them) and providing some modeling at the start of the process so that students can be positioned for success. The goal is to realize that there are reasons to use the narratives and reasons to be careful about their use, and to demonstrate that not all historians or scholars necessarily agree. I would have students complete a T-chart that we begin and they finished on their own that lists the pros and cons that they find. One useful example that students can look at is the Blassingame article referenced above and the idea of leading questions that one finds in the Boudry exchange that it contains.

Once their charts are complete we would discuss as a class each component that they pulled from the scholarship. Here I would encourage the teacher to fill in any gaps that may arise so that students leave this section of the unit with a comprehensive overview of the benefits and drawbacks. At the conclusion of this part of the unit I would ask students to make a claim about the use of the narratives and support that claim with pieces of evidence from the charts that they have assembled. Students will be asked to reflect on the question "Should the WPA Slave Narratives be used as sources to learn about slavery?"

The idea here is to get students to see that every source has multiple benefits and drawbacks, and their interview assignments can and should be revisited here to emphasize that point. How did the memories of family members differ even when asked the same questions? Did every student ask the same questions? How do questions affect the memories that come back?

Some possible classroom activities at this point would include a look at some of the actual questions and a comparison of the interviews completed by white interviewers and black interviewers. Some information about

both is included on the Library of Congress website and I have included the links below in the bibliography. The activities themselves will be described more fully below, but both are geared towards students investigating and discussing the drawbacks and benefits of the WPA narratives in a collaborating and experiential manner.

Narratives Revisited – Teaching About Sources

The unit will conclude by using the WPA Slave Narratives in conjunction with another source to try and even out the aforementioned challenges. Here we return to Peter Bruner. Students have already worked with his interview contained in the WPA source. Now they will get the opportunity to read through Bruner's own narrative that was first published in 1918 and make comparisons. These comparisons will shed light on several aspects of historical thinking.[28]

Students will be able to see what specific differences exist between the two different accounts of Bruner's experience and will discuss what they do or do not tell us about the WPA Slave Narratives. The first and most obvious is the length. Bruner's account of his own life is a fifty-four-page book, while his interview with the WPA staff is typed up at 2.5 pages only. What events are in one account that are not in the other? Why? Which seems more detailed? Does the additional detail mean that one source is more accurate than the other? More useful? More important than the specific answers to these questions are that students learn to ask these questions and grapple with the answers.

Then students will think about the idea that maybe the question to ask is not 'should the sources be used?' but '*how* should the sources be used?' Rather than discounting a source that may have drawbacks, how can a developing historian learn to ask questions, make comparisons, and think more deeply about what they are reading and seeing.

This then is perhaps the greatest benefit to using these WPA sources in the classroom. They are an excellent tool to teach students how to question and analyze sources. Focusing on this skill within the issues of learning more about slavery will yield benefits for students throughout their educational careers as they practice and deepen their critical historical thinking skills. This process of questioning a source can be used with any source, and one hopes that this process of learning to question sources will continue for these students in subsequent classes.

Teaching Strategies

This unit is a multiple step process and a wide variety of teaching strategies will be used. Although some direct instruction will be necessary the goal will be to shift responsibility to the students as quickly as possible, with proper modeling, support, and differentiation as needed. At all times the overall goal of this unit will be to enhance historical thinking skills and students will work towards forming their own opinions about this material, collecting evidence and tools they will need to support their opinions.

Prior to teaching this unit students will gain background knowledge through direct instruction about slavery in the United States and will be prepared to learn about the experiences of enslaved people. The first step in this unit will be a whole class review of one slave narrative using predominantly teacher modeling in order to set a

tone and preview a format/organizer. Students will then work in pairs or triads to review a second narrative, using the same format/organizer and will share their work in one of several formats, either presentation or gallery walk.

The second step will involve examining and questioning the sources. As noted earlier students will be exposed to a set of primary sources that have specific and well-documented drawbacks. Students will again work in pairs or triads to examine some of the scholarship about these drawbacks and compare/contrast what historians have written about using them. Inquiry-based learning will be utilized as much as possible with students using the sources and the scholarship to formulate questions (with teacher assistance as needed), search for answers, present findings and then critique other student work as well.

Once students have had a chance to investigate and discuss the drawbacks and the scholarly literature they will return to examining the narratives, this time with a much more critical eye. Students will be asked to review excerpts and try to predict what question the interviewers may have asked, and students will be asked to try and identify interview bias, leading questions, and other examples of the noted drawbacks of the narratives. Students will also be asked to make a judgment about the sources at some point and use evidence to support that claim. A variety of activities will be used during this part of the unit but all will be rooted in collaborative learning.

Student Activity Samples

---

1) Experience of Slavery Wrap Up Activity

Objective:

Students can determine historical significance by evaluating details about the experience of slavery and negotiate/collaborate with classmates to create a combined overview and individual list of most significant experiences.

Procedures:

As a wrap up to the research that students conduct on the experience of formerly enslaved persons, each student pair/triad will create a poster that outlines details about the experience of enslaved persons. Posters should contain both text and visual components that outline the experience of their assigned ex-slave. Typically I would require three to five detailed bullet points with at least three relevant illustrations, but individual teachers could adjust as necessary. These posters will then be displayed on the classroom wall to allow for easy access.

Once all posters are completed, students will be given three colored dots and asked to vote on the most significant responses by placing their dots onto the posters. This is designed to foster thinking about significance and provide a practice opportunity for students to decide what is important and why? After students have had time to circulate and vote the votes should be tabulated, displayed, and discussed. I usually use the document camera or create a Google Slide to type onto and display. At this point the class should create a top ten list, though depending on the posters and class engagement one could adjust that number.

Now that students have collaborated on the class list, they should be asked to refine the list on their own to once again practice historical significance thinking. Have the students (using the class list) select their personal top three, and write a short paragraph explaining why they made those choices. This last part of the activity could be done in class, or could be started in class and finished up as a homework assignment.

The narratives that I use for this assignment are chosen to give a variety of experience for the students to read about. Although I use narratives from Ohio and Kansas, the formerly enslaved persons chosen are from a variety of other states. Some of the narratives are very short and some several pages long with more detail. Remember that these are organized on the website by state, and the specific files that I chose from are: Arkansas (vol 2, part 6), Georgia (vol 4, part 4), Ohio (vol 12 – Charles Anderson, Sarah Woods Burke, Susan Bledsoe), Kansas (vol 6 – Clayton Holbert, Bill Simms, and Belle Williams), and Florida (vol 3 – Josephine Anderson, Mary Biddie, Rivana Boynton, and Matilda Brooks).

2) Effects of the Race of Interviewers

Objective:

Students can make and support a claim, using evidence, about specific differences in sample narratives based upon the race of the interviewer.

Procedures:

In order to better understand what effects the race of the interviewer had on the stories told by the formerly enslaved persons, students will work with a partner to compare and contrast two different narratives and then create a short writing response in which they make a claim about the effects and support that claim with evidence from one or both of those interviews.

On the Library of Congress website there is an appendix that is supplied by Yetman that lists the race of several of the WPA writers. For my classroom I have selected one set of interviews from Arkansas and one from Georgia, with each set containing a narrative produced by a black interviewer and a narrative produced by a white interviewer. From Arkansas I chose black interviewer Sam S. Taylor's interviews of James Reeves and Sallie Crane and white interviewer Irene Robertson's interviews of Milton Ritchie and Ida Ridgeley. Longer interviews will be excerpted but not changed. From Georgia I chose black interviewer Edwin Driskell's interview of William Ward and white interviewer Grace McCune's interview of Cordelia Thomas.

Students will be again groups in pairs, with some triads if necessary. I should perhaps mention that throughout the unit (and indeed my whole school year) students are mixed and matched with different partners in order to get a variety of experiences working with different classmates. Each pair will be given a set of two narratives and will be asked to work together to identify the specifics of the experiences reported, creating a list on a T-chart or some other organizer that separates the notes about the black interviewer and the white interviewer.

Once students have the list I would ask them to report out on any patterns. Some possible questions to consider at this point would be: 1) which narratives contain more details overall? 2) Are there events in the narratives produced by the black interviewers that are not seen in the other, and vice versa? 3) What specific differences can be observed - are there some details in one not found in the other such as diet, working conditions, treatment of families, descriptions of punishments, etc.? 4) Which narratives 'ring truer' in the opinion of the students, and why?

Once students have had time to research, reflect, and discuss I would then supply a writing prompt and ask them to consider and respond about which type of interviewer produced the most accurate, relevant, and useful narrative for studying the experience of enslaved persons. It is important to communicate to students that there is no one 'right' answer that they are expected to produce. They must work to make their own claim about importance and relevance and are tasked with using evidence/example from the narratives as support. In this way they again practice and refine their historical thinking skills.

In this activity I would have students doing the research together in class and would discuss the questions above as a whole group. I would ask my students to begin the writing in class so I could support them and they would finish as homework. There are certainly other ways to meet the objective that teachers at other levels or with different student populations could utilize.

Teachers wanting to use this activity can find Yetman's list about race in the 'Articles and Essay's page of this collection, and the specific narratives that I used came from Arkansas (vol 2, part 6) and Georgia (vol 4, part 4). The narrative are fairly easily accessible by state on the Library of Congress website.

3) Thinking About the Questions

Objective:

Students can match segments of narratives to a series of questions provided and explain why they made those matches.

Procedures:

One of the assignments earlier in the unit is for the students to interview a family member about a recent event and then have those answers compared in class. We will create a list of five questions together in class and the students will ask only three. Because of the variation in questions chosen and because of individual memory there should be some variety in the responses that students bring back, demonstrating that interviews are often affected by the questions. This activity would be a follow up to link the student interview assignment to the study of the narratives.

In order to prepare teachers should access the Administrative Files (see below for hints about how to access) and on page xx see a list of questions that were supplied from the national office. One cannot assume that all questions were asked in all interviews, but this list of questions gives a starting point to discuss what type of questions were typically asked. There are twenty questions, some multipart questions, listed on page xx and xxi, and another ten can be found on page xxxii. Teachers should select some or all of these questions and then print them out onto orange or other brightly colored index cards or other small pieces of card stock. The questions should be numbered to facilitate the matching process.

How many questions used would depend upon grade level and time available, for this activity I would select 12 specific questions so that there were three sets circulating in the classroom for my sized classes. In this way students that are struggling to match can see what other students have done and decide if they agree or not, providing them with a starting point for their own thinking.

Teachers should then select excerpts from narratives that could reasonably be matched with the sample questions chosen. For my classroom I would chose a mixture of excerpts from narratives that students have worked with before and combine these with some new material. The excerpts would be printed out large enough to be easily read from a short distance and displayed on the walls of the classroom. The excerpts

should have an easily seen alpha designation, again to facilitate matching.

Students would then take their question cards, perhaps three for each student, and be given time to circulate around the room selecting their matches. I would supply a very simple graphic organizer for this task, a space to record the letter of the expert side by side with the number of the questions that are holding. While not specifically a partner activity there is no reason that students cannot or should not work on this assignment cooperatively, assisting each other as needed or desired. I would also be circulating the room at this point assisting where necessary. This matching process is certainly customizable to grade level and teacher preference.

On the day of this activity I would take two questions (not used in the class set) and four short excerpts and model the process for the students. I would pass out the list of questions for the students to have in front of them and then display an excerpt on the screen. For the first excerpt I would talk them through the process and think aloud about how I arrived at my match. I would then display another excerpt and give the students two to three minutes with their elbow partner to discuss and decide, asking students to then share their decisions and thinking as well. This will provide students with a method for working on their own, but again this prep exercise is customizable depending upon specific teacher needs.

Once students have had time to work with the questions and excerpts and have made their matches, I would ask them to reflect on why. What specific words or phrases led them to make their specific matches? Are there patterns that emerge? What can be learned from these patterns – were some questions used more than others? What effects would this variation have had on the output of the interviews? This discussion primes the students for the final part of the assignment.

Students in my classes would then be asked to write about the activity. Why did they make their own matches and what evidence of their thinking (examples from the excerpts) can they select to explain their thinking. Again, the goal is not correct or incorrect answers, the goal is to develop thinking skills and use reasoning and evidence to explain and support that thinking.

Specific to the 20-21 school year, this matching assignment could also be done using Google Slides or some other technology, moving the activity from the physical classroom to the online classroom as necessary. As long as there are two distinct sets of information (questions and interview segments), the process is modeled or introduced somehow, and the students have the opportunity to discuss together and then reflect on their thinking, the activity should work.

The Administrative Files can be found on the About this Collection page of the greater set of webpages, and while unable to share a specific link that may not be permanent, I can share one possible search tree: [Library of Congress, Digital Collections, Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936 to 1938, About this Collection].

Notes

---

[1] Paul Horton, “The WPA slave narratives: teaching with oral histories,” Social Education 66, no. 1 (2002): 1.

[2] Cynthia Lynn Lyerly, “Using the WPA Slave Narratives in the Classroom,” in Understanding and Teaching American Slavery, ed. Bethany Jay and Cynthia Lynn Lyerly (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2016): 207-208.

[3] Catherine A. Stewart, Long Past Slavery: Representing Race in the Federal Writers’ Project (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 17,18.

[4] Norman Yetman, “The WPA and the Slave Narrative Collection, The WPA and Americans’ Life Histories,” Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936 to 1938, Library of Congress, accessed July 10, 2020, https://www.loc.gov/collections/slave-narratives-from-the-federal-writers-project-1936-to-1938/articles-and-essays/introduction-to-the-wpa-slave-narratives/wpa-and-the-slave-narrative-collection/.

[5] Stewart, Long Past Slavery, 62.

[6] Melinda D. Anderson, “What Kids Are Really Learning About Slavery,” The Atlantic Online, February 1, 2018, https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2018/02/what-kids-are-really-learning-about-slavery/552098/.

[7] Library of Congress, “Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 2, Arkansas, Part 2, Cannon-Evans,” Library of Congress Manuscript/Mixed Material, accessed July 10, 2020, https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn022/.

[8] Yetman, “The WPA and the Slave Narrative Collection.”

[9] Stephanie J. Shaw, “Using the WPA Ex-Slave Narratives to Study the Impact of the Great Depression,” Journal of Southern History 69, no.3 (2003): 623+.

[10] IBID, 623+.

[11] John W. Blassingame, Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies (Baton Rouge: University of Louisiana Press, 1976), xliv.

[12] Cynthia Lynn Lyerly, “Using the WPA Slave Narratives in the Classroom,” 209.

[13] John W. Blassingame, “Using the Testimony of Ex-Slaves: Approaches and Problems,” Journal of Southern History, 41 no. 4 (1975), 474.

[14] IBID, 484-485.

[15] Lynda M. Hill, “The WPA Federal Writers’ Project Reappraised,” Oral History, 26 no. 1 (1998), 68,69.

[16] Cynthia Lynn Lyerly, “Using the WPA Slave Narratives in the Classroom,” 209.

[17] John W. Blassingame, “Using the Testimony of Ex-Slaves: Approaches and Problems,” 482.

[18] Stewart, Long Past Slavery, 133.

[19] John W. Blassingame, “Using the Testimony of Ex-Slaves: Approaches and Problems,” 483.

[20] Stewart, Long Past Slavery, 134.

[21] Cynthia Lynn Lyerly, “Using the WPA Slave Narratives in the Classroom,” 209, 210.

[22] John W. Blassingame, “Using the Testimony of Ex-Slaves: Approaches and Problems,” 482, 483.

[23] Cynthia Lynn Lyerly, “Using the WPA Slave Narratives in the Classroom,” 210.

[24] Donna J. Spindel, “Assessing Memory: Twentieth-Century Slave Narratives Reconsidered,” The Journal of Interdisciplinary History, 27 no.2 (1996), 252.

[25] IBID, 252.

[26] Jeff Strickland, “Teaching the History of Slavery in the United States with Interviews: Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936-1938,” Journal of American Ethnic History, 33 no.4 (2014), 42.

[27] John W. Blassingame, “Using the Testimony of Ex-Slaves: Approaches and Problems,” 486.

[28] John W. Blassingame, Slave Testimony, lvii.

Annotated Bibliography

Anderson, Melissa. “What Kids Are Really Learning About Slavery?” *The Atlantic*, February 1, 2018. https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2018/02/what-kids-are-really-learning-about-slavery/552098/ *Anderson discusses the challenges of teaching about slavery in general terms. For this unit her thoughts on primary sources are especially useful.*

Blassingame, John W. “Using the Testimony of Ex-Slaves: Approaches and Problems.” *The Journal of Southern History* 41, no. 4 (1975): 473-492 *The author lays out the challenges of using biography. His discussion includes issues associated with 19th century autobiography as well as discussing in some detail the drawbacks associated with the WPA narratives.*

Blassingame, John W. *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies,* (Baton Rouge: University of Louisiana Press, 1976). *In his introduction to this book Blassingame discusses the unique opportunity to compare and contrast the stories of Peter Bruner (one written by Peter himself and one written by the WPA interviewer).*

“Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writer’s Project, 1936 to 1938.” Library of Congress. Accessed July 7, 2020.

Bruner, Peter. *A Slave’s Adventures Toward Freedom.* San Antonio: Historic Publishing, 2017. *Bruner’s account of his own life (1st published in 1918) provides a useful counterpoint to the story told about him through the WPA interviews.*

Escott, Paul D. “Reflections on “Slavery Remembered.” *The North Carolina Historical Review* 57, no. 2 (1980): 178-185. *In this paper Escott discusses his reasons for relying on the WPA interviews when writing his own book. In doing so he creates useful information for students to review that allows them to see both sides of the debate about their usefulness in the classroom.*

Hill, Lynda M. “Ex-Slave Narratives: The WPA Federal Writers Project Reappraised.” *Oral History* 26, no. 1 (1998): 64-72. *This discussion of the narratives focuses on the paperwork that the editors completed as they evaluated each of the narratives submitted.*

Horton, Paul. “The WPA Slave Narratives: Teaching with Oral Histories.” *Social Education* 66, no. 1 (2002): S3+. Gale Academic OneFile (accessed May 1, 2020). https://go.gale.com/ps/anonymous?id=GALE%7CA83139487&sid=googleScholar&v=2.1&it=r&linkaccess=abs&issn=00377724&p=AONE&sw=w. *Horton offers his own thoughts and plan for using the WPA Narratives in the classroom, discussing positive and negative aspects and offering a preview of some of the methods/activities that he would use with students.*

Lyerly, Cynthia Lynn. “Using the WPA Slave Narratives in the Classroom.” In *Understanding and Teaching American Slavery*, edited by Bethany Jay & Cynthia Lynn Lyerly, 207-215. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2016. *Lyerly presents a step-by-step outline of the uses and issues with the narratives, offering both information about their shortcomings and strategies for the classroom in using them as primary sources.*

Shaw, Stephanie J. "Using the WPA ex-slave narratives to study the impact of the Great Depression." *Journal of Southern History* 69, no. 3 (2003): 623+. *Gale In Context: U.S. History* (accessed July 9, 2020). https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A107834863/UHIC?u=29002&sid=UHIC&xid=8ecde6e1. *Shaw offers a unique perspective on the Narratives. While she does not neglect to discuss their drawbacks, she moves beyond them by suggesting that they can and should be used to study the Great Depression and its impact on any number of groups including but not limited to the formerly enslaved persons. This alternate perspective supports the idea that any source can be useful regardless of its challenges.*

Stewart, Catherine A. *Long Past Slavery, Representing Race in the Federal Writers’ Project.* Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 2016. *The Stewart book is an incredibly detailed look into the narratives, the people involved in preparing them, and the issues associated with their validity and use. Although too detailed in many cases to be useful for the Middle School classroom, this work was essential in absorbing the overall arguments about this source and worth reading.*

Swindel, Donna J. “Assessing Memory: Twentieth-Century Slave Narratives Reconsidered.” *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 27, no. 2 (1996): 247-261. *Swindel surveys multiple studies about the function of memory and how it degrades in old age and applies this scholarship to not only the WPA Narratives but other writings of formerly enslaved persons from the 19th and 20th Centuries.*

Swogger, Michael J. “Race and the WPA Slave Narratives: A lesson in Historiography.” *Social Education* 81, no. 6 (2017): 383-388. *Swogger outlines his own strategies for using the narratives in his classroom and provides some additional detail about possible classroom activities for teachers interested in more.*

Yetman, Norman R. “Ex-Slave Interviews and the Historiography of Slavery.” *American Quarterly* 36, no. 2 (1984): 181-210. *Yetman presents one of the more positive interpretations of the narratives and creates some useful excerpting for presenting to students both sides of the use or don’t use debate. He also contributes*

several essays on the Library of Congress website, which can also be used to demonstrate different perspectives about these sources to students. Those three essays are included below.

Yetman, Norman R. “WPA and the Slave Narrative Collection.” Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936 to 1938. Library of Congress. Accessed July 7, 2020. https://www.loc.gov/collections/slave-narratives-from-the-federal-writers-project-1936-to-1938/articles-and-essays/introduction-to-the-wpa-slave-narratives/wpa-and-the-slave-narrative-collection/.

Yetman, Norman R. “Importance of the Slave Narratives Collection.” Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936 to 1938. Library of Congress. Accessed July 7, 2020. https://www.loc.gov/collections/slave-narratives-from-the-federal-writers-project-1936-to-1938/articles-and-essays/introduction-to-the-wpa-slave-narratives/importance-of-the-slave-narratives-collection/.

Yetman, Norman R. “Limitations of the Slave Narratives Collection.” Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936 to 1938. Library of Congress. Accessed July 7, 2020. https://www.loc.gov/collections/slave-narratives-from-the-federal-writers-project-1936-to-1938/articles-and-essays/introduction-to-the-wpa-slave-narratives/limitations-of-the-slave-narrative-collection/.

Appendix on Implementing District Standards

Specific California Content Standards:

California Content Standard 8.7: analyzing the path of American life in the South: *Students will use the WPA narratives to attempt to create an overall picture of what the experience of slavery was like in the per-civil war period of United States history. Although slavery was not just a Southern issue as the California standard might imply, the bulk of the narratives were obtained in Southern states.*

California Content Standards 8.11: character and consequences of Reconstruction: *Students will also be looking at commentary about the experiences of post-slavery life that is contained in the narratives, which will allow them to comment on the character and consequences of Reconstruction according the these specific primary sources.*

California Historical Analysis Skills:

Research, Evidence, and Point of View 4: Students assess the credibility of primary and secondary sources and draw sound conclusions from them. *Students’ will be reviewing and analyzing a number of primary and secondary sources as they participate in this unit. In particular, students will be analyzing various arguments in secondary sources and creating and support claims about those arguments.*

Historical Interpretation 1: Students explain the central issues and problems from the past, placing people and events in a matrix of time and place. *My students will be asked to use these primary sources to determine whether or not a general idea about the experience of formerly enslaved persons can be created from the sources.*