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

Introduction

by David Engerman, Leitner Professor of History

The relationship between biography and history is a vexed one, especially but not only for professional historians. Often derided as a hopelessly old-fashioned genre celebrating the lives of great men – and certainly there are plenty of such books on library shelves – biography is suspect in the eyes of social historians and others who seek a more inclusive history. Yet, as this seminar discussed, biography can also be an effective way to understand crucial historical events in a new historical canon that focuses on modes of inclusion and exclusion, on inequality and struggles for justice.

At the same time, biography, as the readings in our seminar “American History through American Lives” revealed, can provide a particularly helpful tool for teaching students of all ages, from young elementary schoolers to high school seniors. The seminar for Summer 2020, which met for the first-ever (and hopefully last!) time solely by videoconference, explored different ways that biography could work in the classroom.

Our general readings focused on inquiry-based learning pioneered by Stanford Education professor Sam Wineburg, the author of *Why Learn History (When It’s Already on Your Phone)* as well as some of the unexpected dilemmas of focusing on personal experience as an entry point into historical analysis. The bulk of our readings, however, were oriented towards specific topics shaped by the interests of the National Fellows participating in the seminar. Across the board, from elementary teachers to those working with older students, from teachers on the east coast all the way to California, topical interests revolved around groups facing particular forms of discrimination, structural and otherwise. This proved a neat inversion of the stereotypical biography of great (white) men.

Readings for the seminar centered around social movements, especially in twentieth century America; our readings examined new approaches to the Civil Rights Movement, using the life of unsung leader Bayard Rustin to both extend the timeframe and expand the content of the movement. We read of a number of disputes about who “owns” history, involving Native Americans like Black Elk as well as feminist leaders like Betty Friedan. We also explored in depth an unusual resource: a set of oral histories of former enslaved people undertaken during the New Deal. Those sources are complicated: interviewers were almost exclusively white (including some directly descended from slave owners), rendered the interviewee speech in “dialect,” asked leading questions, and did not accurately represent the distribution or full range of slavery as an institution. But recognizing these difficulties, we concluded, could introduce students to source study in general; there is no perfect historical source, and students should learn to interrogate all historical authority with similar questions that we applied to the New Deal narratives: how did this source come to be? How did it end up in front of us? How do the circumstances of its creation and dissemination affect the ways historians can use it? These questions, not coincidentally, led us directly back to Wineburg’s approach to inquiry-based learning.

The bulk of the curriculum units for this seminar applied one or another element of inquiry-based historical learning to a topic in modern American history, and used the lives of individual Americans to understand some of the broadest concerns of American history. Many of the National Fellows came to the Organizational Session in May with a topic related to race, immigration, and inequality. The resurgence of Black Lives Matter in the wake of George Floyd's murder in late May gave a new urgency to those topics, and led to some redirection of topics. History, as ever, is a dialogue between present and past. One of the National Fellows, Mark Hartung, wrote his unit on the narratives of formerly enslaved people. Many units focused on struggles for justice, especially racial justice – from Andrew Maples's comparison of Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth in the middle of the 19th century to Brandon Barr's use of Emmett Till's murder (sadly, back in the news recently) to teach the Civil Rights Movement.

The National Fellows who worked with the youngest students – as young as first-graders – tended to focus on questions of immigration. Cindel Berlin, Taryn Coullier, and Lauren Freeman used exemplary lives of individuals to illustrate the range as well as the commonalities of immigrant experiences. Lisa Yau undertook an especially creative project to compare anti-immigration sentiment (and actions) to racism over a broad sweep of American history.

While our seminar focused especially on historical lives, Krista Waldron (a veteran National Fellow who served also as Seminar Coordinator) opted to use a fictional life story to illuminate American history. Using Toni Morrison's brilliant early novel *Sula*, Waldron focused not just on the "craft" of this well-crafted short novel, but also its depiction of life in an African-American town undergoing, slowly and fitfully, the changes of the 20th century.

The challenges of 2020 – the Coronavirus pandemic and lockdown, the surge of activism for racial justice – made the seminar topics all the more charged and relevant. But these same events also led two of our initial National Fellows to withdraw, depriving us of potentially powerful voices – but also deprived us of work focused on Native American history. While we missed their involvement, we nevertheless felt our work to be all the more meaningful in these strange and distressing times.

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