

Researching African American Studies on a Predominantly White Campus: Research Tools That Work at Eastern Washington University

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Eastern Washington University is a liberal arts state university located in Cheney, a small rural community, eighteen miles south of Spokane in eastern Washington. The University offers over 80 baccalaureate and over 40 master's degrees and a doctorate in physical therapy, to a student enrollment of about 10,000 (primarily undergraduates) with 5% students of color.

Eastern's School of Social Work and Human Services is subdivided into five disciplines: the Africana Education Program, Alcohol and Drug Studies, the Center for the Studies on Aging, the Chicano Education Program, and the School of Social Work. The Africana, American Indian, and the Chicano Studies comprise the University's three autonomous, ethnic studies programs that provide such services as recruitment, specialized study, support, and retention for the growing student body and its specific co-cultures. Although the enrollment of students of color is relatively small in number, students of color account for only 12% of the student body, Eastern is the only institution in the State of Washington that has retained separate and independent programs to meet the specific needs of those outside the dominant co-culture.

The African American Education Program offers five or six courses each quarter. The four most popular classes are Introduction to African American Culture, Early African American History, 20th Century African American History, and African History. The average class size for these courses is typically 135 students with an average of six or seven African American students in each. These numbers have held true to form over the past fourteen years.

In light of such student demographics, I have found that engaging my students in various research assignments has proven to be a time-tested and viable means to facilitate their entry into the arena of African American Studies for the first time in their academic careers. The purpose of this article is to examine the dynamics of five specific in-class research projects and to identify their relative outcomes that I have observed over the past 14 years of teaching at Eastern Washington University.

The Task at Hand: Assisting Students in Overcoming the Limits of Their Cultural Background Through Research

For a majority of my students, participating in a class on African American Studies is their first occasion of confronting issues of race

and self-awareness from a new-found historical context. This new and unfamiliar exercise in scrutiny and critical thinking brings to light the need to *personally* explore and *personally* verify incongruencies previously left unexamined. This is where the role and principles of research can benefit and serve students in exploring a discipline that seems to undermine and perhaps even invalidate their previous knowledge-base.

There are at least five identifiable areas or obstacles that are common and universal for a majority of my students: 1) the need to gain an understanding with regards to the role of perspective in the matters of race; 2) identifying assumptions and presumptions about the African American experience; 3) confronting simplistic conclusions that are founded on stereotypes; 4) defining the role of the media in dictating one's assessment of America's race relations, and 5) acknowledging the impact of conflicting worldviews outside those belonging to the dominant culture.

Practical implementation of this model is extremely "user friendly." First of all, this research approach requires no special funding on behalf of instructors in order to sustain it. There are no extra expenses for students, outside the typical printing costs of their papers and brief book reviews readily available on the Internet.

The role of faculty, as will be developed in the upcoming sections, is primarily that of a research facilitator within the classroom setting. Each project is predicated on the instructor providing crucial points of historical and theoretical contexts and potential controversies as well as specific examples of past projects and research tools readily accessible to the class. Student recruitment is executed via a strategically-written course description that emphasizes the principles of "journey" and "exploration" into intriguing themes involving race relations and potential policies of resolution. Students are readily interested.

The role of the student within this research model is that of the customary learner at the college level. Research can be adequately conducted during typical study hours outside of the classroom during the quarter or semester. Access to adequate resources works in favor of the students since all required information is readily available at a college or university library and via the Internet.

1. Research: Addressing Race and the Role of Perspective

The background for research in this area is centered first in raising the students' awareness of the four basic and major schools of history. I usually employ two weeks of class time to explain how scholarly articles and books typically fall into four classifications or categories of historical thought: the Progressive School, the Consensus School, the New Left School and the School of Social History.

A majority of the time is taken in lecture and discussion to see the impact of historical context upon publications: the reform-minded era of the 1920s produced historical pieces composed with the focus and theme of group conflict (the Progressive approach); the era of conformity and cold war apprehension of post-World War II produced publications that reinforced a very strong and conventional pro-American theme (the Consensus School); the turmoil and upheaval of the 1960s produced publications that sought to question, scrutinize, and even undermine the American status quo and the conservative slant of conventional history (the New Left School); and finally, the era of the mid-1970s and the rise of the 'Me'-generation gave birth to publications that focused on biographical and social histories to provide a more investigative theme (the School of Social History).

With this background in mind, my students are then presented with a research project to explore the role of historical context and perspective upon historical books or articles: *The Comparative Book Review Analysis*. This task involves selecting a book of any significance related to African American history and locating two book reviews of contrasting viewpoints. The students are then to critically analyze each article and identify its appropriate school of historical thought, citing excerpts that justify their conclusions. For instance, with Alex Haley's *Roots*, students may typically find an Afrocentrist review (New Left) that wholly endorses Haley's findings in contrast to a conservative review (Consensus) that scrutinizes *Roots* with a tone of suspicion and disapproval for some of its unverifiable conclusions.

The value of research in this exercise comes to light as students see firsthand for themselves the impact of perspective upon an individual's assessment and conclusions regarding issues of race. The volatile and controversial nature of U.S. race relations is perceived now with a richer sense for deeper critical thinking and investigative inquiry.

2. Research: Addressing Common Assumptions and Presumptions Regarding Black Leaders

The role of black leadership in the struggle for racial equality is a helpful field for enhancing students' research skills. The background necessary to engage students in this respect begins firstly with an exploration into the wide range of leadership theories. Part of the assignment, as an additional task that I have found more suitable for upperclassmen or honors students, is to require a preliminary treatment and summary of leadership theory in general – with an emphasis on the debate over the individual versus the environment in light of leadership formation.

Next, as a common objective for the general class, it is helpful to set the parameters for the subjects of the research journey, entitled as the *Foundations of Black Leadership Project*. I typically present my students three options to choose from, ideally gaining their sense of ownership into the project that is soon to become their own: 1) A Comparison of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X; 2) A Comparison of W.E.B. DuBois and Booker T. Washington; and, 3) A Comparison of John Hope Franklin and Molefi Asante. These three counterparts provide numerous areas of rich contrasts for the exploration into leadership formation. The task is first launched by reviewing with the class the general assumptions and presumptions commonly held about each leader in most conventional circles. Much discussion and consideration is given to this aspect in order to create an investigative aspiration in each student and to propel them into the research ahead.

At this point, setting the parameters of the research task is appropriate. This aspect consists of seven fields: 1) Family Background and Socio-Economic Status; 2) Specific Social Setting of the Individual; 3) The Role of Faith; 4) The Role of Education; 5) Targeted Audience/Followers; 6) Ideology for Combating Racism; and, 7) Leadership Style and Methodology. With an expectation to synthesize and defend their conclusions, students typically enter into a deeper level of analysis by researching these elements.

The value of research in this regard is multifaceted. The impact of institutional, social, and internal forces upon visionary leaders facing racial oppression seems to take on a new level of appreciation within the students. Rather than being told so through lecture or an assigned reading of a given book, they are allowed to discover for themselves the complex and sophisticated formative influences that shaped African American leaders at various junctures of our history. Rather

than just seeing the individual, students grow to apprehend the depths beneath the surface of assumptions and presumptions that only personal research can render.

3. Research: Addressing Simplistic Conclusions Regarding Race-Sensitive Issues

The primary objective in this research task is to increase the student's level of self awareness in relation to emotional topics involving race. Research, in this regard, enables the student to objectify the subjective; at least, for the moment. By giving way to more rational thinking based on various research practices, I hope to foster a student's ability to listen and learn about the "whys" behind African American reactions and aspirations and that this may enhance more constructive cross-cultural interaction and exchange.

The pursuit of this endeavor involves a *Summary-Comparison Analysis* in which the student selects from three options provided: 1) Affirmative Action and Higher Education; 2) African Americans and Slavery Reparations; and, 3) The Debate over Ebonics in Oakland's Public Schools. These topics surface an array of feelings and reactions among undergraduates today. In preparation for the research assignment, I generally spend whatever amount of time I deem necessary to ensure that the class as a whole understands the underlying issues embodied in these matters: equal access to opportunity, remedies for racial discrimination of the past and the present, white privilege, validation of one's cultural identity, and the impact of race in American society.

The research task consists of locating articles from scholarly journals and periodicals that provide a stark dichotomy of positions on the topic chosen. The student is to summarize each narrative, provide a personal critique of the strengths and weaknesses of each, and finally, compare and contrast the two articles. They should also provide background information on the orientation and frame of reference of the journal's publishers and any pertinent information of the same with regards to the authors of the articles.

The research value that I have observed in this exercise has been encouraging. Students routinely express an appreciation for the journey itself, regardless of whether it changed their viewpoint or not. The important outcome is that they have taken the time to step back and examine their own belief system against the backdrop of scholarly analysis and observations; ending up, hopefully, less inclined to digesting simplistic overtures of complicated issues that so often encompass U.S. race relations.

4. Research: Addressing the Impact of the Media upon U.S. Race Relations

This research task involves preparing the class to first see that much of our interaction with those racially different from us is based on our being conditioned by common and widespread misperceptions – misperceptions often conveyed through the media. Without much need for me to solicit or facilitate discussion, students typically volunteer a wide spectrum of views in this regard. Topics tend to center on the African American association with urban crime, poverty and welfare misuse, drug abuse, black rage, dysfunctional families, and educational shortcomings.

Whereas the media may present the African American in an unfavorable light, the challenge within this research assignment, *Race Images: An Annotated Bibliography*, involves an abbreviated literature review in search of the documented truth. Students initially develop the topic of their choice with an opening section (two or three pages) explaining the intent of their research. Then the key is to pursue significant references, on both a macro- and micro-level, that would address the actualities of the theme selected. For instance, the over-representation of African Americans in the prison system, along with the racial discrepancies in sentencing, could open up observations on a much deeper level than mere statistics and quantitative findings; the same with facts on the history, application, and impact of affirmative action in higher education. Notations that justify the reference's selection would further demonstrate the student's apprehension of the literature.

The research value in this case is found in the student's journey from mere images and impressions provided through the media to verifiable truth and conclusions. By reference compiling and highlighting, the student can be impressed with the breadth and width of an issue previously conceived from a much narrower viewpoint. Again, the potential for better and improved dialogue on issues of race is enhanced from my observation in the past.

5. Research: Addressing Race and the Diversity of Worldviews

The primary objective in this research assignment is to familiarize the students with an awareness of conflicting life-paradigms that impact the quality of communication between races. Frequently, the divisions and chasms that exist within today's U.S. race relations are tied into the simple yet subtle inability to understand each other. Because such

misunderstandings produce various levels of suspicion and mistrust, it is imperative for students to grasp the differences in worldview as conveyed in the ideologies of Afrocentrism and Eurocentrism.

This research assignment, *Afrocentricity and Eurocentricity: Value Systems in Conflict*, is designed to walk students through the basic African American dilemma articulated by W.E.B. DuBois as the controversy of “double-consciousness.” How to reconcile being both black with Afrocentric tendencies and also American with Eurocentric assumptions? Students are to define and identify in history these two sharply contrasting worldviews as well as address DuBois’ basic query of “Can I be both black and American?” I typically will suggest additional research into the ideologies of Dr. King and Malcolm X for the sake of greater clarity and insight. This question posed by DuBois touches the essence of what constitutes a black integrationist and what constitutes a black nationalist.

The research value inherent in this assignment is the students’ impression of their new-found awareness of the impact of worldview upon race relations today. They feel they are able to understand on a new level the role of an individual’s frame of reference and its motivating power to produce ideologies and consequent action and behavior. Now the issue of race interaction has taken on a whole new tone as a result of investigative inquiry and research. Students are more receptive to challenging their own reference points as well as to learning about and accepting the resulting, consequential lifestyle of others.

Conclusions

My experiences in using research and issues of race have been quite rewarding as an educator. In many situations, volatile topics in the arena of race and racism can tend to cause students to close off and hide behind reinforced and entrenched concepts and conclusions. This common obstacle seems to be minimized by approaching the subject from its separate parts rather than from its “raw whole.” Themes along the lines of the role of perspective, unexamined assumptions, oversimplified conclusions, the media’s influence, and the impact of one’s worldview appear to disarm students of their unconscious, defense mechanisms.

A second major observation relates to the critical importance of the classroom atmosphere. Once students feel that they are in a safe environment – a setting where all divergent thoughts and beliefs are accepted and embraced on the same level – there seems to be an

unspoken license to step forward and explore new levels of critical thinking. Facilitated by the appropriate research exercises, students enter into a self-directed, self-disciplined, self-monitored, and self-corrective level of thinking, which is the essence of critical thinking. The outcomes most evident are enhanced communication and problem solving abilities accompanied by a commitment to overcome native egocentrism and sociocentrism. Arriving at any new level of this state, personally as well as academically, is most satisfying for all involved.

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