

Commentary for “America’s Civil Rights Movement” Unit

Brooke Machado, April 24, 2020

Find the referenced unit plan and three sample lesson plans at <https://www.sabes.org/curriculumELA>.

The Civil Rights Movement transformed life in the United States, enveloping some of the most defining years in American history. I have continuously embedded some form of instruction on Civil Rights in my adult education classes since my first job teaching ESOL at night school in Dorchester. The “America’s Civil Rights Movement” instructional unit and lesson plans are a compilation of what has worked best for my students over the past 20 years. The material can be taught in its entirety or in parts coupled with other history- or civics-based lessons.

Why teach America’s Civil Rights Movement?

America’s Civil Rights Movement is a worthy subject to teach for numerous reasons. Students have a natural interest in the topic so are drawn to it. Most, regardless of where they are from, have basic knowledge of some of the era’s most important players and key events, and they are often hungry to know more.

This semester, I kicked off the unit by asking what they want to learn. One student shared that while she knows who Dr. King is, and his famous speech, she wanted to gain a deeper knowledge of why he gave the speech, and what was happening in the country before and after it. In my experience, this type of close questioning and discovery of new knowledge often drives students throughout the unit.

Another reason to teach America’s Civil Rights Movement is because through it, as teachers and learners, we get to discover the movement’s origins and connections through multiple points in history. Through the lens of the Civil Rights Movement, students can learn about America’s history from the colonial era, through America as a new nation, and the Civil War and Reconstruction, all the way to its implications in modern day.

Additionally, students have the opportunity to discover what is lesser known, sadly in part because it is lesser taught. My students say, year after year, that during their time in school, they were not taught important Civil Rights topics. I once read a statistic that only some 2% of high school students are familiar with *Brown v. Board of Education*, for example. Many of the texts encountered in Civil Rights teaching expose students to the lesser known change-makers and events that have changed the country.

The students respond

My students have proclaimed liking this topic more than others we cover about history all year (that's fine by me, no offense taken!). Observably, students are energized throughout the learning, often sharing the knowledge they acquire with their loved ones and beyond. When I have asked, "What do you want to remember about the American Civil Rights Movement?" here are some of my students' responses:

"What I want to remember from the American Civil Rights Movement is how African Americans fought against discrimination in order to gain equal rights in the United States. They started to challenge society on discrimination and social difference between racial groups. Many of the Civil Rights Movement leaders lost their lives while they were advocating for changes. Even though the Civil Rights Movement groups accomplished some of their goals, still we have discrimination in our society."

"Although the Civil Rights Movement created positive change for all African Americans, the fact is that African Americans, as well as other non-white nationalities, have still been subjected to acts of racism and discrimination to this day. However, I have learned about many instances of atrocities committed against African American slaves, but also acts of bravery and sacrifice by many African Americans who resisted their abusers and fought for change."

"The Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments to the Constitution were created to protect the rights of all people no matter what race they are. However, it was not enough because African Americans were still being persecuted and oppressed. We want to remember that black activists helped form the Civil Rights Movement so that everyone should be treated equally, and are allowed to use or to be served in any public facilities."

"What I want to remember about the civil rights movement is the unbelievable struggle my African American ancestors went through simply trying to obtain basic rights that are due to all humans. I know the stress this has imposed on our lives today, and I see how far we have grown in America pursuing these rights. I mostly want to remember the strength my people showed in this time. I truly believe that this is part of what makes us as strong as we are today. The things we deal with every day like poverty and unnecessary boundaries that are put in place simply to suppress us will be the same things that makes us stronger and unstoppable."

Recommendations for use with STAR

If you teach a STAR class, for adult learners who read at GLE 4.0–8.9, you can incorporate the Civil Rights Movement as the topic through which to teach and practice the essential components of reading—alphabetics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension.

Alphabetics: Teach decoding and syllabification using tier 1, 2, and 3 words from the unit. Instruct students to find words that follow the patterns from the lessons.

Fluency: Select a novel for Collaborative Oral Reading, Repeated Reading and Echo Reading, from the Civil Rights period. Suggestions include:

- *Freedom's Children: Young Civil Rights Activists Tell Their Own Stories* by Ellen S. Levine
- *Turning 15 on the Road to Freedom: My Story of the 1965 Selma Voting Rights March* by Lynda Blackmon Lowery
- *The Secret Life of Bees* by Sue Monk Kidd
- *The Watsons Go to Birmingham--1963* by Christopher Paul Curtis

Vocabulary: Use the phases of Explicit Instruction to teach “Key Vocabulary” and provide opportunities for guided practice, e.g. Fill-in-the-blank, Sentence Completion, Read and Respond, etc.

Comprehension: Incorporate appropriately-leveled texts on the subject of America’s Civil Rights Movement for guided practice with strategies such as Get the Gist and 5 Ws + H, etc.

Other modifications

Teachers can modify the unit plan or lesson plans to accommodate the needs of their students or to better work among other existing constraints. Activities like the brainstorm, timeline, and conversation mingle work well as stand-alone activities or can be added to an existing Civil Rights unit that instructors teach. The poster project could be modified to incorporate technology by creating a short slide presentation, or by designing as a one-pager that gets published in a class book.

For teaching in the pandemic era, I am exploring ways the activities and materials could be adapted to teach remotely or in a hybrid model so that students can continue to grow by connecting previous knowledge with new knowledge and concepts they learn.

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