



TEACHING AFRO-AMERICAN WITH A

A FAIR treatment of the black man's role in history is long overdue. More and more material is available to teachers to make the black experience really come alive. It cannot be taught without emotional reaction, however. Inevitably, the student's own racial values will get in the way of level-headed consideration of innocent enough historical facts, but to teach it with utter blandness would be all wrong. Negro history is too viable to justify name-dropping Crispus Attucks and then rushing on to the next Negro in order to make sure we get through the Coolidge administration so we can mention Malcolm X in time for the final exam.

The study of Afro-American history is particularly ripe with values implications because the jump between *then* and *now* is too often not very startling. Many of the white students will not find it very hard to think like a plantation owner, and a fair percentage of the black students may do everything but call the teacher Mistah Charlie. Working on black history will bring to the surface many of the conflicts which too often only break out on the playground.

It is these very values conflicts which need to be aired, faced, and clarified if we are to have hope for some racial peace in this country.

The Hot Passion of Values

Teachers would be more willing to deal with the hot passion of values in the classroom if they knew some techniques for working with values in more systematic ways.

Perhaps, too, they would avoid those typical pitfalls of moralizing, indoctrinating, or preaching. The sad truth is that there is probably no worse way to grapple with values than to insist that every student come out with the accepted set of values. What we advocate is the *search* for values, and our entire approach is focused upon the *process* which teaches how to build values, rather than memorize them.¹

Take the following, for example. We call it "Rank Ordering."

1. *Rank Ordering.* Put questions like these to one student at a time. Write alternatives on the board and ask him to rank them 1-2-3.

You are a slave who has been promised a brutal whipping. After thinking out the consequences, do you:

1. Run away
2. Fight the master
3. Take the whipping?

You are a slave woman with children who has a chance to escape. Do you:

1. Escape alone
2. Stay with the children
3. Take them along?

You are a plantation slave whose master has fled before the Union Army. Do you:

1. Try to carry on the work of the plantation

¹ For a fuller explanation of the theory supporting this approach and for other values strategies, see: Louis E. Raths, Merrill Harmin, and Sidney B. Simon. *Values and Teaching*. Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Company, 1966.

HISTORY FOCUS ON VALUES



SIDNEY SIMON *
ALICE CARNES

2. Ransack the place
3. Run away to the Union lines?

It should be apparent that these rank orders can involve students almost immediately. Although they are supposedly rank-ordering what they would do as a slave who has been promised a whipping, their own lives and their own values are what they are really talking about.

Briefly, the aim of this approach to values is to direct the student toward the examination and clarification of his own values. A "value" is defined operationally as something freely chosen, after due reflection, from among alternatives; it is, moreover, something which is prized, publicly affirmed, and acted upon. Students are encouraged to apply these criteria to the beliefs they voice in class.

As students learn to apply these criteria consistently in their study of history, they become skillful in carrying these standards over to their understanding of current events and to those more personal things which surround their daily living. For example, take the technique we call the values continuum.

2. *The values continuum*: the image of the slave.

"Sambo" and Nat Turner are at opposite poles, and while polar thought is useful at times, in the case of slavery it is probably a distortion of reality. To help students imagine the shades of grey between two stereotypes, draw a line on the board to represent a continuum of values.

"Sambo" (complete submission)	Nat Turner (open revolt)
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Make a list of alternative positions (aiding fugitives, playing a role for the white man, attending secret church services, escaping via the Underground Railway, informing on other slaves, etc.). The students individually or as a group try to place these and other alternatives along the continuum. (It's not as easy as it looks!)

Now, some teachers would then be content to move on to the next topic of study. Others would, perhaps, try to take it up another notch in the process of value clarification. Such teachers might ask:

1. In your way of dealing with *teachers*, where are *you* on the continuum?
2. Make a rank order of the various stances people take when black people move into a previously all-white neighborhood.
3. What do *you* really want to achieve in terms of race relations for America? What are you willing to do about it?

It is important to stress that if the teacher is really to help the search for values, he must not punish those students who give him the "wrong" values and reward those who feed him the party line. On the other hand, he is not to remain chameleon-like and agree with everything. He may have a position which he states strongly, but he offers it

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as only one alternative, for consideration, not for adoption.

In fact, just to keep the issue alive and, in a sense, confused, he may play devil's advocate to great advantage.

3. *Devil's advocate.* "Put on your horns" and challenge the class to disagree, as you play the devil's role broadly and sardonically. "What was wrong with slavery anyway? Why, the slave worked in the fields only fourteen hours a day, which was two hours less than his white counterpart in the factories. He had housing, sometimes even with windows and floors; he got half a pound of meat a week; and after he was old enough to work he'd get a new pair of jeans every year. The slave had no responsibilities. He didn't have to marry or stand trial in court. And his kindly ol' massa took care of him in his old age."

4. *Open-minded question.* Give as an essay assignment: "If I were in charge of the Freedmen's Bureau I would . . ."

5. *Role playing.* Establish a plantation system in the classroom. (The teacher should immediately volunteer to be a slave.) Set up situations: the slave too sick to work, the father who watches his son get whipped, the master's amorous overtures to a slave woman. Introduce alternatives by bringing in other characters. Have students switch roles within the same situation.

6. *The values sheet.* Here is a sample values sheet taken from *Values and Teaching*.² It can be assigned in class or as homework. It is important to give students time to think. Later, the sheets may be used as the basis for discussion; or the teacher can simply leave them in the hands of the students.

Merry-Go-Round
by Langston Hughes

Where is the Jim Crow section
On this merry-go-round, Mister?
Cause I want to ride.

Down South where I come from
White and colored
Can't sit side by side.

² *Ibid.*

Down South on the train
There's a Jim Crow car.
On the bus we're put in back—
But there ain't no back
To a merry-go-round!
Where's the horse
For a kid that's black? ³

1. When was the last time you were on a merry-go-round?

2. If you happened to be in line and overheard the incident that takes place in the poem, is there anything *you* might have said to that little boy?

3. Have you ever experienced anything similar to that boy's feeling?

4. What prejudice, subtle or otherwise, have you ever personally faced?

5. If you wanted to *do* something about the problem of "civil rights," what are some things you could do:

a. Right in this school, through some school group.

b. In your town, with some community organization

c. On the national level?

6. Perhaps you believe that nothing needs to be done about this problem. If so, state that position clearly and forcefully.

These are not techniques which "reach" every child; but they have a marked effect upon some. A child who expresses racist beliefs may come to see that his belief was accepted *per se* from his parents, friends, and other persons, without questioning or consideration of alternatives. Students who profess liberal or militant views may begin to weigh the extent to which they are willing to act upon them. If nothing else, these strategies encourage students to think.

The teaching of Afro-American history is a trend we can little ignore. Riots are a reality we had better heed, but more tokenism is not what we need. Black history must be taught as more than a reluctant submission to a fad. Giving it the highly charged focus of the search for values could make the difference. □

³ Langston Hughes. *Selected Poems*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1959.

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