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Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois: Guiding Students to Historical Context

Abstract:

Seldom have two vastly different visions been expressed as clearly and as elegantly as in Booker T. Washington's *Atlanta Exposition Address* (1895) and W.E.B. Du Bois's "Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others" (from *The Souls of Black Folk*, 1903). Awash in memorable rhetoric, these competing philosophies foresaw very different paths for America, and for black social progress, at the dawn of the twentieth century.

This lesson introduces students to the ideas and informational texts of Washington and DuBois while challenging students to research some of the historical context in which these men lived, worked, and thought.

This lesson should take at least two class periods, and with readings, can be expanded to approximately a week.

Common Core State Standards:

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.2d Use precise language and domain-specific vocabulary to manage the complexity of the topic.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.7 Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question) or solve a problem; narrow or broaden the inquiry when appropriate; synthesize multiple sources on the subject, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.9 Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

Materials:

Chalkboard/whiteboard

Students will need computers with access to the Internet for the research portion of this lesson.

Procedure:

1. In my experience teaching these texts, students often struggle to understand why Washington would seem so conciliatory on issues of African American progress and equality on social and educational issues. Realizing the "mood" of much of the country and the unique challenges – and threats – faced by blacks in this period can help to bring some understanding to his position, and a different appreciation to the position of Du Bois. To that end, provide students with the following list of topics, which you can then have them research in or out of class:
 - a. *Plessy v. Ferguson*
 - b. The content and reception of Thomas Dixon's play *The Leopard's Spots*

- c. The content and reception of Thomas Dixon's book *The Clansmen*
- d. The Atlanta Riots of 1906
- e. Lynching (focus on ~1880-1920)
- f. Sam Hose
- g. Tuskegee Institute
- h. Sharecropping

Be warned (and perhaps more importantly, warn your students) that some of these topics can contain information and photographs that are violent, graphic, and disturbing.

2. Allow students to select their topic(s). I ask them to select two-to-three that they're interested in, and ask them to verify that they are doing different topics than their neighbors (this ensures that all topics get covered and, since no one is sure who else is doing their topic, provides some accountability to each other)
3. Depending on the "depth" of research you want the students to engage in, allow for an appropriate amount of time. I often do this in a single class period, with students using laptops and reporting back basic findings by the end of class. It is certainly possible, however, to extend the research time and deepen the expectations.
4. Have students report back their findings to the class so that all topics are covered. I like to have them annotate their topics on the board to help guide our discussion – all students who researched a given topic, for example, write a note or two from their research on the board.

This activity may be done before or after assigning the texts of Du Bois and Washington.