Strategies for Teaching African American History: Musings from the Past, Ruminations for the Future

Author(s): Pero Gaglo Dagbovie

Source: *The Journal of Negro Education*, Fall, 2006, Vol. 75, No. 4 (Fall, 2006), pp. 635-648

Published by: Journal of Negro Education

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/40034663

REFERENCES

:Linked references are available on JSTOR for this article

https://www.jstor.org/stable/40034663?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references_tab_contents

You may need to log in to JSTOR to access the linked references.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and .facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at https://about.jstor.org/terms

is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Journal of Negro Education*

This content downloaded from
165.106.105.118 on Wed, 05 Aug 2026 16:55:33 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

The Journal of Negro Education, 75 (4), 635-648

Strategies for Teaching African American History: Musings from the Past, Ruminations for the Future

Pero Gaglo Dagbovie **Michigan State University**

The existing body of scholarship on the teaching of African American history in higher education dates back to the early twentieth century, and an analysis of it helps lay the foundation for the adoption of relevant pedagogies for the new millennium. In this article, the author (a) conceptualizes African American history as well as its educational value and goals, (b) critically explores and historicizes significant scholarship on the teaching and learning of African American history, and (c) suggests strategies for teaching African American history at the introductory university survey level. This article ultimately seeks to contribute to dialogues concerning teaching in the African American historical profession, especially as it relates to the education of millennial hip-hop generation university students.

INTRODUCTION

Following the pivotal Black student protests of the Civil Rights era and Black Power Movement, mainstream, predominantly White universities began offering courses related to the African American experience, often under the umbrella of Black Studies. It was during and after the "blistering years" (Brossard, 2001, pp. 65-67) of the Black Studies Movement from the late 1960s until the early 1970s that the multi-layered African American experience—past, present, and future—became a not-to-be-overlooked topic in college and university curriculums throughout the nation. History has always been a main "core subject area" (Karenga, 1982, pp. 35-38; Asante, 1992, p. 26) of Black Studies. History was also one of the first major disciplines in which African American scholars created autonomous intellectual traditions and institutions that existed side by side White America's various exclusionary academic infrastructures during the era of Jim Crow segregation through the Black Power era. Several years following the 1983 "state of the art" conference on the study and teaching of African American history at Purdue University, Darlene Clark Hine optimistically commented: "Today Afro-American history is a respected and legitimate field of American history" (Hine, 1986, p. ix). Presently, African American history arguably represents one of the most dynamic sub-fields of U.S. historical inquiry and higher education.

At the same time, leading scholarship on history teaching and learning, most notably the illuminating study, *Knowing, Teaching, and Learning History: National and International Perspectives*, has failed to address African American history (Stearns, Sexias, & Wineberg, 2000). The teaching and learning of African American history in higher education warrants more scholarly discourse. As data from the report of the American Historical Association's Committee on Graduate Education suggest, lack of preparation for teaching is a serious concern for history and other graduate students (Bender, Katz, Palmer, & the Committee on Graduate Education of the American Historical Association, 2004). Equally important, American culture and society has undergone a host of pivotal transformations since the so-called mainstreaming of African American history several decades ago that require university professors of African American history to reconsider, reframe, and critically reflect on their approaches to teaching as well as the increasingly diverse learning processes of their students. More broadly speaking, as Huber and Hutchings (2005) passionately argued, "the scholarship of teaching and learning is an imperative for higher education today, not a choice" (p. 13) because "teaching today is harder than it used to be" (p. 20). Focusing on the historical evolution of the scholarship on the teaching of African

This content downloaded from
165.106.105.118 on Wed, 05 Aug 2026 16:55:33 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

American history in higher education, this article addresses the following inquiries. What is African American history and its educational value? What are some timely goals for teaching African American history to today's university students? How have scholars theorized the teaching of African American history since the early twentieth century? In what manner can history professors today help their students, mainly diverse groups of hip-hop generation and millennial learners intimately understand African American history?

DEFINING AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY, ITS EDUCATIONAL VALUE, AND ITS PEDAGOGIC GOALS

Notwithstanding the complexity of responding to the ancient query, "What is history?" an investigation into the teaching of African American history must begin with a concrete conceptualization of this phenomenon. "As a field of study, Black history is the interpretation, application, and rigorous study of the Black past with all its complexity" (Dagbovie, 2006, p. 67). The knowledge of African American history evolves and changes as new historical interpretations, paradigms, and ideas are generated. Since its earliest phases, African American history, on the one hand, has been characterized by an enduring struggle for civil rights, justice, equality, and liberation. On the other hand, the African American historical experience is characterized by a unique sense of human resilience: "the capacity to rebound from a major setback or tragedy," "more than stoicism or a return to the status quo; it involves going beyond healing and recovery" (Cones & White, 1999, p. 49). The teacher of African American history faces the challenge of maintaining a delicate balance between themes of victimization and perseverance, constantly acknowledging African American agency and subtle forms of resistance without trivializing the multitude of tragedies and setbacks that African Americans have encountered for centuries.

The African American experience is not monolithic. It is comprised of many diverse experiences and should be taught and learned as such. African Americans' day-to-day lives at different time periods depended on many factors, such as, region, religious orientations, intraracial dynamics, gender and sex, class, legal and extra-legal forms of oppression, broader social, political, economic, and cultural transformations, change over time, and their relationships with other Americans. African American history has many sub-fields determined by time periods, topics, and themes. African American history consists of the total experience of Black people in the United States, yet throughout history, many phenomena in Africa and the Diaspora, namely the Caribbean, have impacted Black Americans in meaningful ways, and vice versa. African Americans are culturally an African people and, as Keto and Asante have posited, represent "a specific discrete African ethnicity" (Asante, 1992, p. 24; Keto, 1991). While African American history is an established distinct sub-field in American history and Black people have unique experiences therein, African Americanists must avoid simply teaching African American history as a "self-contained," "insulated," historical "group in isolation from the others" (Anderson, 1994, pp. 102-103). African Americanists should teach about their subjects as they intersect with other groups in the United States and compare with other peoples throughout the world. The African American experience, African Americans' lives in the formal United States, has lasted from 1789 until the present. For teaching purposes, this experience of 217 years can be subdivided into the three broad major phases indicated in the figure (Figure 1).

During Phase 1 of the African American experience, from the ratification of the U.S. Constitution in 1789 until 1865 when the 13th Amendment was ratified and abolished slavery, the vast majority of African Americans were slaves. The first federal census of 1790 indicated that there were 697,897 enslaved Blacks and 59,557 free Blacks (Hine, Hine, & Harrold, p. 125). In 1820, there were 1,538,125 enslaved Blacks and 233,504 free Blacks; and in 1860 there were 3,953,760 enslaved Blacks and about 488,000 free Blacks (Hine, Hine, & Harrold, pp. 125, 148-149). Free Blacks in the North and South often lived their lives as "quasi free" (Franklin, 1943) people and "slaves without masters" (Berlin, 1974, p. xiii). The years from 1865 until 1965, Phase 2 of the African American experience and close to half of the total experience, was marked by African Americans' struggles for basic civil and human rights. Phase 2 consists of a multitude

This content downloaded from
165.106.105.118 on Wed, 05 Aug 2026 16:55:33 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

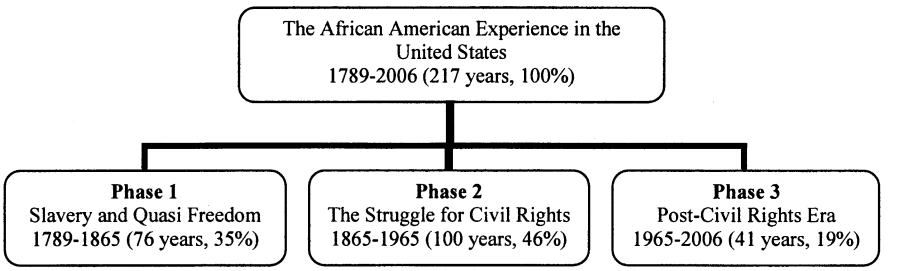

Figure 1. The Three Major Phases of the African American Experience, 1789-2006.

of important periods and transformations, including Reconstruction (1865-1877), the "nadir" (the low point of Black life from 1877 through the early 1920s), the Great Migration, World Wars I and II and the Korean War, the Great Depression, the era of Jim Crow segregation from the *Plessy v. Ferguson* case in 1896 until *Brown v. Board of Education, Topeka, Kansa*s (1954), the Cold War, and the modern Civil Rights Movement (roughly 1954-1966). Despite the continuing oppression of African Americans, the permanence of institutional racism, and the continued economic, political, and social underdevelopment of numerous African Americans nationwide, during Phase 3 of the African American experience (1965 until the present), African Americans have attained and been granted most of their basic civil rights. Figure 1 clearly demonstrates that at this point the vast majority of the African American experience in the United States, about 81% of the total experience, has been lived in some form of overt struggle for basic equal rights and justice. Figure 1 must be revised every year, reflecting the increase in time elapsed from the passage of the *Voting Rights Act of 1965* marking the end of the Second (legislative) Reconstruction and Phase 2. The fate of African Americans in the future is unsure. Nonetheless, it will not be until about 2145 that at least 50% of the total African American experience will have been spent in a post-Civil Rights era, theoretically, a period "free" from the widespread and overt denial of African Americans' fundamental civil and human rights.

African American history's educational value can be discerned in numerous ways and its political nature as an educative device operates at various levels. Even though they did not explicitly refer to African American history in their study, Stearns, Sexias, and Wineberg (2000) addressed the political dimension of history that is very applicable to African American history:

> History, qua school subject, has a hard time avoiding present political purposes. Given the inherent moral implications of any historical narrative, insofar as school history engages with and shapes collective memory, it is inherently political, whether the agenda is focused on national progress, the struggle for human rights, global awareness, ethnic identity, or something else. (pp. 8-9)

African American history helps revise, complicate, and diversify "standard" U.S. historical narratives. For many White millennial learners, African American history serves as a useful introduction to African American culture. Exposure to African American history can help counter U.S. popular culture's routine misrepresentations of Blackness, thereby diminishing Whites' stereotypes and misunderstandings of African Americans. African American history can help today's Black college and university students, especially members of the millennial hip-hop generation (those Blacks born in the early to mid-1980s), better understand their particular location within the enduring African American struggle for advancement, instilling within them a sense of social responsibility, historical and cultural identity, and historicity. Exposure to African American history can challenge the millennial hip-hop generation to critically contemplate its status and compare its contributions with those of other generations of young Black people during and before the Civil Rights era and Black Power Movement.

This content downloaded from
165.106.105.118 on Wed, 05 Aug 2026 16:55:33 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Products of an unprecedented state of information technology, millennials tend to be ahistorical. For many, "the half-life of information is short" and "results and actions are considered more important than the accumulation of facts" (Oblinger, 2003, p. 40). A significant number of today's college and university students have presentist worldviews, often overlooking the connections between the past and the present. The monumental problems facing African Americans today are many: health issues (i.e., AIDS/HIV, diabetes, sickle cell anemia, and obesity) fatherlessness, male incarceration rates, poor college and university retention rates, and poverty. The African American experience historicizes these dilemmas, directly linking them to deeply rooted evolutionary processes. African American history demonstrates that the contemporary problems facing Blacks are the byproducts of various pasts and incidences, impacted by contemporary developments and interpretive models, and related to future trends. Several studies are especially useful in demonstrating to millennial learners the connection between the past and the present in the context of African American history, including W. Michael Byrd and Linda A. Clayton's two-volume *An American Health Dilemma* (2000), Randall Robinson's *The Debt* (2000), Philip F. Rubio's *A History of Affirmative Action, 1619-2000* (2001), Raymond A. Winbush's (Ed.), *Should America Pay?: Slavery and the Raging Debate on Reparations* (2003), and Manning Marable's *Living Black History: How Reimagining the African-American Past Can Remake America's Racial Future* (2006), and most importantly, Tavis Smiley's *The Covenant with Black America* (2006). Many contemporary issues and incidents can also serve as insightful teaching opportunities for African American history (i.e., the reinvestigations into the murder of Emmett Till, the murder trial and conviction of Edgar Ray Killen, the Senate's recent apology for lynching, and the tragedies of Hurricane Katrina).

History teachers and professors have individual goals and purposes for teaching African American history. Based on this author's conceptualization of African American history, instructors should help their students: (a) historicize the African American experience while developing a "multiperspectivical historical truth" (Seixas, 2000, p. 31) for their times; (b) acquire knowledge and understanding of African American history based on analyses of the existing historiography, multiple interpretations, conflicting accounts, and primary sources; (c) recognize African Americans' various contributions in the creation of the United States culture and history in relationship to other groups of American peoples; (d) decipher how African Americans have historically responded to legal and extralegal forms of racial-, class-, and gender-motivated oppression; (e) determine what historical factors make African Americans a unique group despite their intraracial diversity and commonalities with other American peoples; (f) imagine, from Afrocentric, authentically descriptive, and explicitly non-presentist perspectives, what life was like for African Americans during the different historical periods under consideration; and (g) construct their own insightful and practical systems for explaining, comprehending, and operationalizing African American history.

A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE SCHOLARSHIP ON THE TEACHING OF AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY SINCE THE 1920S

The teaching of African American history in colleges and universities has been an issue of importance for African American scholars and historians since the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While the American Historical Association's Committee of Seven assessed "the teaching of history . . . in American schools" in 1899 (Gardner, 1986, p. 171), sophisticated discussions about the teaching and study of African American history were initiated by Black intellectuals, including countless late nineteenth and early twentieth century educators, early Black historians such as George Washington Williams, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Carter G. Woodson, and other scholars at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs). During the era of Jim Crow segregation, many Black historians and scholars at HBCUs actively taught African American history and certainly developed pedagogical ideologies and strategies (for instance, George Edmund Haynes at Fisk University; Woodson, Rayford W. Logan, Elsie M. Lewis, Charles H. Wesley, Walter Dyson, and Marion Thompson Wright, among others, at Howard University; Earl

This content downloaded from
165.106.105.118 on Wed, 05 Aug 2026 16:55:33 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

E. Thorpe at Southern University; Lorenzo Johnston Greene and William Sherman Savage at Lincoln University, Missouri; James Hugo Johnston and Luther Porter Jackson at Virginia State College; Benjamin Quarles at Morgan State University; L. D. Reddick at Dillard University; Merl R. Eppse at Tennessee State University; Alrutheus A. Taylor at Fisk University; and John Hope Franklin at St. Augustine's College, North Carolina College for Negroes, and Howard University).

However, in response to the Black student protests of the 1960s and 1970s, predominantly White universities scrambled to initiate courses in African American history. Prior to the Black Power era and the "blistering years" of Black Studies, the teaching of African American history at predominantly White universities was rare. In 1919, Woodson was optimistic in observing that Ohio State University, the University of Nebraska, the University of Oklahoma, the University of Chicago, the University of Missouri, and Harvard University offered courses pertaining to the so-called "Negro Problem" (Woodson, 1919, p. 278). At the same time, he acknowledged the near unanimous White academic racism of his times. In the 1930s, Philip Foner introduced African American history at City College of New York (CCNY) and in 1937, Max Yeargan, the first African American to teach at CCNY (part-time), taught "what was probably the first formal Black history course in the curriculum of a predominantly White college" (Meier & Rudwick, 1986, p. 109). At the end of World War II, "there were scarcely twenty Black historians with Ph.D.s engaged in or available for college teaching positions" (Meier & Rudwick, 1986, p. 134) and the first full-time African American historian to teach at a predominantly White university was John Hope Franklin. In 1956, he was hired to serve as the chairman of Brooklyn College's history department (Meier & Rudwick, 1986, p. 127).

Published scholarship on the teaching of African American history began as a distinct topic of interest in the 1920s and has existed in two major phases: (a) the 1920s until the eve of the modern Civil Rights Movement and (b) the "blistering years" of Black Studies (the late 1960s and early 1970s). In the 1980s and early 1990s, a few studies on the teaching of African American history surfaced. Beyond a handful of articles in *The History Teacher*, *The School Review*, *The Journal of Black Studies*, *Social Education*, and *The Journal of American History*, many of scholarly articles on the teaching of African American history have appeared in *The Journal of Negro History* and *The Journal of Negro Education*. Most of these articles, moreover, have tended to focus on teaching African American history at the secondary school level. The historical scholarship on teaching U.S. history, in general, pre-dates that on African American history and since the early 1990s has "come into being" (Stearns, Seixas, & Wineberg, 2000, p. 2) as a field. Although provocative, it has collectively failed to directly acknowledge the teaching of African American history, even including the most recent opus (see Stearns, Seixas, & Wineberg, 2000).

Carter G. Woodson was important in popularizing African American history during the first half of the twentieth century. Discussions about the teaching of African American history were common at early meetings of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History (ASNLH). For instance, at the annual conference in Durham, North Carolina in 1925, there was an important symposium at the Durham State Normal School on the teaching of African American history. After founding Negro History Week in 1926, Woodson routinely philosophized about the importance of teaching African American history at all educational levels. Beginning with *The Negro in Our History* (1962), originally published in 1922, Woodson produced a distinct genre of scholarship to specifically aid in the teaching of African American history. Between the early 1920s and the early 1950s, a handful of articles focusing on the teaching of African American history were published in *The Journal of Negro History*. Echoing Woodson, in "The Teaching of Negro History," Bell argued that the teaching of African American history "will serve the two-fold purpose of informing the White man and inspiring the Negro" (Bell, 1923, p. 123). About a decade later, in another article,. Bailey maintained that the African American history teacher should "take as his aim the dissemination of the truth . . . with the idea of opening the minds of the class to the possibilities of the future" (Bailey, 1935, p. 26).

In 1951, two articles on teaching African American history appeared in *The Journal of Negro History*. Brewer called on history teachers to be organized, dispassionate, and dedicated to "the stubborn facts of history" (Brewer, 1951, p. 71). He offered six "methods of teaching Negro

This content downloaded from
165.106.105.118 on Wed, 05 Aug 2026 16:55:33 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

history" relevant to his times: using biographies, analyzing African Americans in business and the professions, and using visual arts, family records, African American magazines and newspapers, and socio-drama. Johnson published an insightful article in *The Journal of Negro History* on teaching African American history to adults. Johnson suggested that African American history teachers focus on the "nature of the learners" when determining "the guiding principles for the selection of content" (Johnson, 1951, p. 198). He called for "dramatic" yet "educative" teaching methods that were relevant to adult learners' realities. Drawing from popular culture, he pointed out, for instance, using Ethel Waters' life as a point of departure into broader trends in African American history. A pragmatist, Johnson also encouraged teachers of African American history to use the mass media, existing adult education programs, and other readable materials.

Collectively, the published pre-Black Studies Movement scholarship on the teaching of African American history was limited, largely free from debates, and reflected the formative years of the African American historical profession. Johnson's 1951 essay on teaching African American history to adult learners was perhaps the most innovative pre-Civil Rights era and Black Power Movement assessment on teaching African American history. His ideas of making African American history relevant to a particular group of learners are especially applicable when considering the millennial hip-hop generation.

While there may be a lack of published scholarship on teaching African American history from the early 1950s until the late 1960s, with the Black Power era, the Black Studies Movement, and the institutionalization of African American history in the late 1960s and the 1970s, scholarship on teaching African American history flowered. Mirroring the sudden upsurge of African American historiography, many articles were produced on teaching African American history in higher education between 1969 and 1979. Interestingly, many of these articles were written by scholars who made marginal contributions to African American historiography. The treatment of African American history in *The History Teacher*, an important scholarly outlet for historians' discourse on teaching founded in 1966, is a testimony to the mainstream U.S. academy's response to the Black Studies activists' call for the study of African American history. Between 1969 and 1980, eight articles on African American history appeared in *The History Teacher*, five of which briefly reviewed teaching resources (see Cassidy, 1969; Guenther, 1971; Psencik, 1973; Sears, 1976, Terborg-Penn, 1980). The remaining three articles probed more deeply into the actual processes, strategies, and challenges of teaching African American history. For instance, Joyce and Whalon (1970) discussed their experiences of teaching "an experimental course" in African American history at the University of Tulsa during the peak of the Black Power era, highlighting that the course was well-received by their students, only three of whom were Black. Whalon and Joyce placed a priority on African Americans' perspectives. "As Whites teaching Black history," they recalled, "we thought it essential to permit the Black experience to speak for itself as much as possible. One way we attempted to do this was through Black speakers and films" (Joyce & Whalon, 1970, p. 34). Similarly, Candeloro published an intriguing essay on his experiences of teaching African American history at the Ohio State University, Lima Campus. As an "experience in cooperative historical research and writing" and oral history (Candeloro, 1973, p. 25), he required his students to research the history of Blacks in Lima, Ohio. Candeloro (1973) celebrated the fact that his class "brought inexperienced White students into contact for the first time with numerous Black figures in the community" (p. 27).

As many mainstream colleges and universities raced and struggled to initiate Black Studies programs, institutes, and courses, more than a few significant articles were published on the teaching of Black Studies and history. One of the more critical articles on the teaching of African American history published during the outbreak of Black Power in the academy was published by Drimmer (1969), a history professor at Spelman College. He argued that two different curricula were needed to teach African American history, "one for Black and one for White students" because "Blacks and Whites bring various levels of awareness and knowledge to the basic course" (p. 440). White students, Drimmer maintained, "must be brought along slower, realizing—and I do not mean to be patronizing—that they are culturally deprived. To Whites every little thing must be explained and proved" (p. 440). Drimmer suggested that universities hire White professors to

This content downloaded from
165.106.105.118 on Wed, 05 Aug 2026 16:55:33 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

teach White students African American history and Black professors teach Black students. He argued that knowledgeable Black high school teachers be used as resources and that there be the development of "a dozen or more centers for the teaching and study of Black history" (Drimmer, 1969, p. 442) at institutions with in-tact African Studies centers as well as at Black colleges.

Drimmer proclaimed that African American history was a consciousness-raising device for White and Black students, taught in a manner that recognized the suffering that characterizes the African American experience so that Whites in particular will "not forget what it has meant to be a Black man in White America" (Drimmer, 1969, p. 442). He also stressed that the teaching of African American history be integrated into the teaching of the American experience so that a totally new, "revolutionary" approach and narrative is produced. "What is needed most," Drimmer highlighted,

> is not to segregated Black history from the basic American history programs, but to build the Black vision and experience so into the American experience that a completely new version of American history emerges. This is . . . the revolutionary potential of Black history. (Drimmer, 1969, p. 442)

Drimmer's historical integrationist argument and ideal, initiated most explicitly by Carter G. Woodson, remains to be achieved.

In 1968, Yale University hosted a historic symposium on Black Studies where a diverse group of professional scholars, intellectuals, and activists discussed higher educational institutions' responsibilities to re-evaluate the role of African American life and culture in their curricula. Redkey presented a paper entitled "On Teaching and Learning Black History" in which he argued that African American history could not only enlighten White students but could serve as a tool for teaching other disciplines and subjects. Redkey structured his paper as a critical response to popular ambivalence and objections "to the idea of teaching the Black experience in schools" (Redkey, 1969, p. 182). Among other teaching strategies, Redkey encouraged history educators to consider African American history within the contexts of colonialism and nationalism and to teach the African American experience within a comparative framework with other ethnic groups.

In April 1969, *Social Education*, the official journal of the National Council for the Social Studies, devoted an issue to the teaching of African American history. Hare (1969) and Harlan (1969) offered some thought-provoking insight. Hare, founder of the precedent-setting Black Studies movement at San Francisco State College in the late 1960s, stressed that in order to fulfill its "therapeutic value" African American history must be taught from "the Black perspective" that is relevant to Black community health and the creation of a "new America" (Hare, 1969, pp. 386-387). Hare's ultimate goal was unapologetically activist-centered. "The teacher of Black history and culture," he asserted, "must be an agent for transforming history and culture, making the student as well a part of that transmission and ultimate transformation" (p. 387). For Hare, African American history needed to strengthen Black students' commitment to their communities at local and national levels. It should be no surprise that he supported creative and pragmatic teaching methodologies, such as, community-based field work assignments. Like Woodson, Hare also advocated that African American history teachers tap into African American holidays, historical sites, pageants, and oral histories so that "the student experiences some of the fabric of the history and culture as he learns it" (Hare, 1969, p. 388).

In direct contrast to Hare, Harlan, a self-proclaimed "old-fashioned integrationist" White professional historian, opened his essay in *Social Education* by articulating his disagreements with those Black cultural nationalists who sought to enlist "Black history in the cause of racial revolution" (Harlan, 1969, pp. 390-395). Harlan (1969) offered five major interpretive themes for teaching African American history: (a) White racism, (b) a non-progressive character, (c) historical cyclicalism, (d) cultural history, and (e) urbanization. Harlan agreed with his Black cultural nationalist adversaries on at least one key pedagogical tool, autobiographies and other writings of African American spokespersons. While out of touch with the youthful Black Studies movers and shakers, Harlan, like other moderate commentators on the teaching of African American history (Brown, 1969; Krug, 1969; Wheeler, 1970), was clearly concerned with novice and professional Black historians' militant rhetoric and the quest to employ African American

This content downloaded from
165.106.105.118 on Wed, 05 Aug 2026 16:55:33 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

history as a viable vehicle for Black advancement and psychological liberation. By deeming African American history a non-progressive history stamped by racial oppression, Harlan also ignored the central theme of perseverance in African American history, a concept that needs to be introduced to students.

Challenging the racism and opportunism of White scholars, as well as the nationalistic tones and agendas prevalent during the Black Studies Movement, Blassingame argued in his essay "Black Studies and the Role of the Historian" that African American history be taught by rigorously trained historians in the field, Black and White; objectivity being paramount. Blassingame's essay prioritized delving into the controversial debate surrounding who should and could effectively teach African American history. Objectivity, scholarly precision, and an ideal "search for the truth" were all paramount. White historians, must strive for cross-cultural and multidisciplinary understanding and acknowledge new methods of retrieving knowledge (Blassingame, 1971a, 1971b). According to Blassingame, Black historians who were called on by Black university students for their insiders' views and who were in great demand during the scramble to hire African American teachers, had to avoid the pitfalls of myth-making, seeking to "obtain a hearing for the have nots" (Blassingame, 1971b, p. 224).

At the closing of the 1970s, Cooper published a practical essay in *The Journal of Negro Education* on using Black popular music as an effective medium for generating "reflection by young Blacks on issues of historical significance" (Cooper, 1979, p. 20) within their communal realities. Essentially, Cooper (1979) outlined how the lives and music of R & B, Soul, and Blues artists, "major lyrical spokespersons," could "provide significant insights into the past, present, and future" (p. 22). Especially intriguing is Cooper's charting of how prevailing themes, concepts, and issues of contemporary African American history are expressed by Black musical artists. Throughout this article, Cooper made a direct plea to historians to be creative in acknowledging Black musicians' place within African American oral history. "It is my opinion that without the introduction of such innovative instructional techniques," Cooper concluded, "the majority of students will continue to question the validity of Black history in their lives" (p. 36). Cooper (1979) also provided his readers with a bibliography of scholarship on Black music as well as a "core album collection" (pp. 33-35). Cooper's approach is very relevant today since hip-hop and R & B music are central to millennial Black students' lives.

Despite several important publications, since the 1980s scholarship on the teaching of African American history at the university level has been scant. The "state of the art" conference on African American history at Purdue University in 1983 did, however, offer some valuable insights into teaching within African American history. Several essays in *The State of Afro-American History* (1986) probed into the value and philosophies of teaching. For example, based on syllabi that she received from six different universities, Gardner suggested that many African American history professors ignored the Black past's complexity, the role of Black women, and vital primary sources (Gardner, 1986, p. 177). At the same time, she acknowledged those professors whose course descriptions were exemplary. "The teaching of Afro-American history," Gardner concluded, "is serious business" (Gardner, 1986, p. 177).

In 1992, Robert L. Harris, Jr. published *Teaching African-American History*. For those expecting a methodological manual on how to teach African American history, the title of Harris' study may be a bit misleading. This pamphlet essentially summarizes the broad trends in African American history from Black Americans' African origins through the modern Civil Rights Movement. However, Harris does suggest a very useful outline:

> [T]he transitions from 'Africa to America,' 'Slavery to Freedom,' 'Countryside to City,' and 'Segregation to Civil Rights' provide a conceptual framework for organizing the Afro-American experience thematically and chronologically and for incorporating it in the trajectory of American history. (Harris, 1992, p. x)

Harris's chart for African American history is pragmatic, highlighting for each of the four major transitions: (a) the over-riding changing process, (b) the turning point, (c) the watershed years, and (d) the transformation of the majority of African Americans.

This content downloaded from
165.106.105.118 on Wed, 05 Aug 2026 16:55:33 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

The significant interest in generating published scholarship on the teaching of history among a coterie of Americanists during the 1990s does not seem to have been shared by African Americanists. It is worth noting that scholarship on the teaching of African American history surfaced during two important periods: the early Black History Movement (1915-1950) and the "blistering years" of the Black Studies Movement (the late 1960s until the early 1970s). Woodson was the pre-eminent figure of the former era and he and the ASNLH saw great value in teaching African American history. *The Journal of Negro Education*, an important outlet for scholarship on teaching African American history, was also founded during this critical period in 1932. The published scholarship on teaching African American history during the middle of the Black Power Movement was largely impacted by the fact that "Black Studies programs began in undergraduate instruction" (Brossard, 2001, p. 67). This does not mean, however, that teaching in and of itself was not important in the African American historical enterprise. It has always been central to the profession, especially before the integration of African American history at mainstream, predominantly White universities. It must also be acknowledged that the scholarship on teaching and learning (SOTL) has been a sub-field for only several decades.

PEDAGOGICAL DEVICES FOR TEACHING AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY UNIVERSITY CLASSROOM

There are many possible creative approaches to teaching African American history in higher education today, many of which are derived from the monumental advancements in information technology. The brief suggestions offered here for teaching an introductory survey on African American history are based on what Brookfield had identified as the "four complementary lenses" of the "critically reflective practice" (1998, pp. 197-205): one's own personal experience ("autobiography as a learner"), the existing scholarship on teaching and learning African American history ("theoretical literature"), conversations with experts in the African American historical profession ("colleagues' experiences"), and interaction with students (the "learner's eyes").

The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education (JBHE) noted that very few Black students "are majoring in Black studies" (Cross, 2005, p. 42). For instance, in 2003 less than 0.7% of all bachelor's degrees awarded to Blacks were in Black Studies and for the same year only 1.3% of Blacks to earn bachelor's degrees were history majors (Cross, 2005, p. 42). However, in 2003 24.7% of all degrees awarded to Blacks were in business (Cross, 2005, p. 42). Viewed in economic terms, it is no surprise that very few Black students nationwide pursue B. A. degrees in African American Studies and/or history. Instead of chastising the millennial hip-hop generation for their lack of historicity and disconnect from African American Studies and history, professors of history should develop new and refreshing strategies for stimulating their students' interest in African American history. How can professors teach African American history so that it attracts greater attention from today's African American millennial learners? What are some effective teaching approaches and strategies for today's African American college and university students?

Professors should actively make African American history relevant to the lives of African American students. This requires that they understand their students' culture. Beyond reading the recent scholarship on the hip-hop generation and millennial learners, the most effective way to understand Black students is through intimate interaction. Without compromising the social distance between the professor and the student, the African American history professor should attend Black students' events as much as possible. Among other discoveries, it will become clear that hip-hop culture, fraternity and sorority life, the Black church, and of course various social events (i.e., parties, fashion shows, cultural programs) are among the salient features of African American millennial student culture.

Hip-hop culture is historically grounded and can serve as an ideal teaching tool, the basis for a "culturally relevant pedagogy" (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 476). Hip-hop consists of many elements and pillars: (a) DJ-ing (deejaying), (b) MC-ing (emceeing), (c) graffiti art, (d) rapping, (e) clothing, (f) visual art, (g) dialect and language, (h) food, (i) accessories, and (j) style. Hip-hop

This content downloaded from
165.106.105.118 on Wed, 05 Aug 2026 16:55:33 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

is essentially a way of life, a culture. "Hip-hop is where our students live—the music they listen to, their traditions, the language they speak, the clothes they wear, the way they interact in the streets" (Bruce & Davis, 2000, p. 122). There are many ways that African American history professors can tap into and appropriate the various components and symbols of hip-hop to teach effectively. The artistic expressions of many of today's hip-hop emcees, most notably Nas, dead prez, Common, Talib Kweli, and Mos Def, can also serve as useful historical, pedagogical mechanisms. These major lyrical spokespersons and other artists delve into African American history in some of their tracks. Furthermore, by nature, historians of the African American experience are similar to emcees. Pioneering hip-hop scholar Tricia Rose (1994) had defined the role of the emcee in the Black community in a manner that is strikingly similar to the role of the Black historian. Historians of African American culture and emcees both tell stories about the past, present, and future. Historians of the African American experience have the potential to be academic emcees, approaching the historian's craft with the passion, energy, and competitiveness characterizing hip-hop. African American historians can also appropriate the rhetorical conditions, rhythms, and styling of exemplary emcees (Rose, 1994, pp. 2-3). This will increase their popularity among the millennial hip-hop generation who appreciate information presented to them with passion, energy, realism, and humor, as their favorite emcees and entertainers do. While historians of the African American past do not need to use the same language that hip-hop artists do, it does not hurt to be familiar with hip-hop language, style, and attire. As Asante (1998) has argued, "visual styling" in mannerisms and attire are vital parts of the African American, Afrocentric rhetorical tradition. "The genius of the speaker determines the quality of the visual styling" (Asante, 1998, p. 50). African American historians born before and during the Civil Rights era may view this approach as being unnecessary and counterproductive to the academic rigor and seriousness of the traditional historian's craft. Nonetheless, research indicates that learner-centered teaching is effective.

The hip-hop generation, like today's U.S. youth culture in general, is very much visually oriented. There is available access to countless photographs and images as well as numerous excellent African American history documentaries, especially those produced by California Newsreel and PBS. There are also a host of contemporary and recently released Hollywood films that can serve as useful departures into African American history. More than anything else, the millennial hip-hip generation has been significantly impacted and shaped by today's monumental information technology, especially through the Internet. Professors of African American history must acknowledge that their students rely on the Internet. Alkalimat's *The African American Experience in Cyberspace: A Resource Guide to the Best Web Sites on Black Culture and History* (2004) is a very helpful starting point for introducing students to those useful Internet sources on African American history and culture. In his most recent study, Marable (2006) has offered an approach to African American history that is very relevant to various groups of millennial learners.

> Reconstructing the hidden, fragmented past of African Americans can be accomplished with a multidisciplinary methodology employing the tools of oral history, photography, film, ethnography, and multimedia digital technology, an approach I call 'living history.' (Marable, 2006, p. xx)

Marable stresses that "a method of historical investigation had to be developed" that "deduced the distance between the past, the present, and the future to effectively reconstruct these authentic narratives" (p. 22).

Educational theorist James A. Banks (1971) has argued that knowledge of the African American past could and "should make a unique contribution to the development of students' decision-making and social action skills" (p. 741), and that African American history is, in essence, applied history. After exposing their students to African American history, professors should develop assignments that challenge the students to develop solutions to the multitude of historically rooted dilemmas still impacting African Americans nationwide. At a minimum, students of the African American experience should be challenged to speculate the future of

This content downloaded from
165.106.105.118 on Wed, 05 Aug 2026 16:55:33 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

African Americans based on the historical record—distant and more contemporary. As Kitwana (2002) and Boyd (2003) have adamantly argued, there is a great cultural divide between the hip-hop generation and their elders from the Civil Rights era. Professors of African American history can help diminish this rift while increasing the hip-hop generation's historicism. For instance, oral history assignments that require students to interview elder African Americans for information about the Great Depression, the eras of World War II and the Cold War, and the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements not only stimulate cross-generational dialogues, but also serve as insightful first-hand windows and primary sources, into these various periods.

While John Hope Franklin and Alvin A. Moss, Jr.'s *From Slavery to Freedom* (2000) remains one of the most widely read textbooks for university courses in African American history, more than a few useful textbooks in this genre have been published in the new millennium. These studies include: Robin Kelly and Earl Lewis' *To Make Our World Anew: A History of African Americans* (2000), James Ciment's *Atlas of African-American History* (2001), Joe William Trotter, Jr.'s *The African American Experience* (2001), Clayborne Carson, Emma J. Lapansky-Werner, and Gary B. Nash's *African American Lives: The Struggle for Freedom* (2005), and most recently Nell Irvin Painter's *Creating Black Americans: African-American History and its Meanings, 1619 to the Present* (2006). *The African American Odyssey* (Hine, Hine, & Harrold, 2005) follows a traditional textbook format, is very easy to follow and highly informational, and in this author's estimation is the overall most well-rounded of the aforementioned textbooks. At the same time, all of these studies provide solid frameworks for students to comprehensively understand the fundamentals of African American history.

CONCLUSION

The blossoming of scholarship on African American history went hand-in-hand with the mainstream academy's sudden interest in African American history. Some of the studies were provocative, while others appear to have been capitalizing on the post-Civil Rights era novelty of African American history in the "White stream" U.S. academy. The post-Black Power era decline in scholarship on the teaching of African American history warrants further investigation and perhaps represents part of a broader characteristic within the U.S. academy that prioritizes "the research ideal" over teaching (Bender et al., 2004, p. 24). However, during the 1990s, a noticeable group of Americanists re-invigorated the scholarship on teaching and learning. Despite the historically rooted and ever-present value of teaching, revisionism, and activism in the African American historical enterprise, African Americanists have not made noticeable contributions, in terms of publications, to the important field of historical scholarship on teaching and learning. Today, there is clearly room for more rigorous scholarship on the philosophies, methodologies, and techniques of teaching African American history at the university level. The teaching of African American history is important. It is a reform project that has the potential to help positively transform the millennial hip-hop generation, U.S. race relations, as well as American culture.

The author wishes to acknowledge Michigan State University's Lilly Teaching Fellows Program, Department of History, and African American and African Studies Program for their support of this research project.

REFERENCES

Alkalimat, A. (2004). *The African American experience in cyberspace: A resource guide to the best web sites on Black culture and history.* London: Pluto Press.

Anderson, J. D. (1994). How we learn about race through history. In L. Kramer, D. Reid, & W. Barney (Eds.), *Learning history in America: Schools, culture, and politics* (pp. 87-106). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

This content downloaded from
165.106.105.118 on Wed, 05 Aug 2026 16:55:33 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Asante, M. K. (1992). African American studies: The future of the discipline. *The Black Scholar, 22*, 20-29.
Asante, M. K. (1998). *The Afrocentric idea* (Rev.). Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
Bailey, J. A. (1935). Perspective in the teaching of Negro history. *The Journal of Negro History, 20*, 19-26.
Banks, J. A. (1971). Teaching Black history with a focus on decision making. *Social Education, 35*, 740-745, 820-821.
Bell, J. W. (1923). The teaching of Negro history. *The Journal of Negro History, 8*, 123-127.
Bender, T., Katz, P. M., Palmer, C. & The Committee on Graduate Education of the American historical Association. (2004). *The education of historians for the twenty-first century.* Urbana: The University of Illinois Press.
Berlin, I. (1974). *Slaves without masters: The free Negro in the antebellum South.* New York: Oxford University Press.
Blassingame, J. W. (1971a). Black studies: An intellectual crisis. In J. W. Blassingame (Ed.), *New perspectives on Black studies* (pp. 149-168). Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
Blassingame, J. W. (1971b). Black studies and the role of the Black historian. In J. W. Blassingame (Ed.), *New perspectives on Black studies* (pp. 207-226). Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
Boyd, T. (2003). *The new H.N.I.C.: The death of civil rights and the reign of hip hop.* New York: New York University Press.
Brewer, W. M. (1951). The teaching of Negro history in secondary schools. *The Journal of Negro History, 36*, 71-79.
Brookfield, S. (1998). Critically reflective practice. *The Journal of Continuing Education in the Health Professions, 18*, 197-205.
Brossard, C. A. (2001). Classifying Black Studies programs. In N. Norment, Jr. (Ed.), *The African American studies reader* (pp. 65-78). Durham: Carolina Academic Press.
Brown, L. W. (1969). Why and how the Negro in history. *The Journal of Negro Education, 38*, 447-452.
Brown v. Board of Education, Topeka, Kansas 347 U.S, 483 (1954).
Bruce, H. E., & Davis, B. D. (2000). Slam: Hip-hop poetry—A strategy for violence intervention. *The English Journal, 89*, 119-127.
Byrd, W. M., & Clayton, L. A. (2000). *An American health dilemma: A medical history of African Americans and the problem of race: Beginnings to 1900.* New York: Routledge.
Candeloro, D. (1973). Undergraduates as historians. *The History Teacher, 7*, 24-29.
Carson, C., Lapansky-Werner, E. J., & Nash, G. B. (2005). *African American lives: The struggle for freedom, Vols. I, II.* New York: Longman.
Cassidy, R. M. (1969). Black history: Some basic reading. *The History Teacher, 2*, 36-39.
Ciment, J. (2001). *Atlas of African-American history.* New York: Facts on File.
Cooper, B. L. (1979). Popular music: An untapped resource for teaching contemporary Black history. *The Journal of Negro Education, 48*, 20-36.
Cones, J. H. III, & White, J. L. (1999). *Black man emerging: Facing the past and seizing the future in America.* New York: Routledge.
Cross, T. L. (Ed.). In selecting a course major only a tiny percentage of African-American college students choose Black studies. *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education, 49*, 42-44.
Dagbovie, P. (2006). *Black history: "Old school" Black historians and the hip hop generation.* Troy, MI: Bedford
Drimmer, M. (1969). Teaching Black history in America: What are the problems? *The Journal of Negro Education, 38*, 440-442.
Fleming, J. E. (1986). History and the Black community. In D. C. Hine (Ed.), *The state of Afro-American history: Past, present, and future* (pp. 197-203). Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press.
Fleming, J. E. (1994). African-American museums, history, and the American ideal. *The Journal of American History, 81*, 1020-1026.

This content downloaded from
165.106.105.118 on Wed, 05 Aug 2026 16:55:33 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Franklin, J. H. (1943). *The free Negro in North Carolina, 1790-1860.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
Franklin, J. H., & Moss, A. A., Jr. (2000). *From slavery to freedom* (8th ed.). New York: Knopf.
Gardner, B. J. (1986). The teaching of Afro-American history in schools and colleges. In D. C. Hine (Ed.), *The state of Afro-American history: Past, present, and future* (pp. 171-183). Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press.
Grice, J., & Sweerts, E. (2002). Hitting the right note: How useful is the music of African-Americans to historians? *Teaching History, 108,* 36-41.
Guenther, J. (1971). Yes, but what Black history? *The History Teacher, 4,* 57-58.
Hare, N. (1969). The teaching of Black history and culture. *Social Education, 33,* 385-389.
Harlan, L. R. (1969). Tell it like it was: Suggestions on Black history. *Social Education, 33,* 390-395.
Harris, W. L., Jr. (1992). *Teaching African-American history.* Washington, D.C.: American Historical Association.
Harris, W. H. (1986). Trends and needs in Afro-American historiography. In D. C. Hine (Ed.), *The state of Afro-American history: Past, present, and future* (pp.139-156). Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press.
Hine, D. C., (Ed.). (1986). *The state of Afro-American history: Past, present, and future.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press.
Hine, D. C., Hine, W. C., & Harrold, S. (2005). *The African American odyssey: Combined volume* (2nd ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.
Huber, M. T., & Hutchings, P. (2005). *The advancement of learning: Building the teaching commons.* Jossey-Bass.
Johnson, R. O. (1951). Teaching Negro history to adults. *The Journal of Negro History, 36,* 194-202.
Joyce, D. D., & Whalon, M. W. (1970). An experimental course in Black history. *The History Teacher, 4,* 30-36.
Karenga, M. (1982). *Introduction to Black studies.* Los Angeles: University of Sankore Press.
Kelley, R. D. G., & Lewis, E. (2000). *To make our world anew: A history of African Americans.* New York: Oxford University Press.
Keto, C. T. (1991). *The Africa-centered perspective of history.* Blackwood, NJ: K & A Publishers.
Kitwana, B. (2002). *The hip hop generation: Young Blacks and the crisis in African American culture.* New York: BasicCivitas.
Krug, M. M. (1969). On teaching Negro history. *The School Review, 77,* 1-17.
Ladson-Billings, G. (1995). Toward a theory of culturally relevant pedagogy. *American Educational Research Journal, 32,* 465-491.
Marable, M. (2006). *Living Black history: How reimagining the African-American past can remake America's racial future.* New York: BasicCivitas.
Meier, A., & Rudwick, E. (1986). *Black history and the historical profession, 1915-1980.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
Oblinger, D. (2003). Boomers, gen-Xers, and millennials: Understanding the "new students." *Educause Review, 38,* 37-47.
Painter, N. I. (2006). *Creating Black Americans: African-American history and its meanings, 1619 to the present.* New York: Oxford University Press.
Plessy v. Ferguson 163 U.S. 537 (1896).
Psencik, L. F. (1973). Teaching Black history in secondary schools: A bibliography. *The History Teacher, 6,* 375-382.
Redkey, E. S. (1969). On teaching and learning Black history. In A. L. Robinson, C. C. Foster, & D. H. Ogilvie (Eds.), *Black studies in the university: A symposium* (pp. 181-191). New Haven: Yale University Press.
Robinson, R. (2000). *The debt: What America owes to Blacks.* New York: Dutton.
Rose, T. (1994). *Black noise: Rap music and Black culture in contemporary America.* Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.

This content downloaded from
165.106.105.118 on Wed, 05 Aug 2026 16:55:33 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Rubio, P. F. (2001). *A history of affirmative action, 1619-2000.* Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.
Seixas, P. (2000). Schweigen! die kinder! or, does postmodern history have a place in the schools? In *Knowing, teaching, and learning history: National and international perspectives* (pp. 19-37). New York: New York University Press.
Sears, J. M. (1976). Black Americans and the new deal. *The History Teacher, 10,* 89-105.
Smiley, T. (Ed.). (2006). *The covenant with Black America.* Chicago: Third World Press.
Stearns, P. N., Seixas, P., & Wineberg, S. (Eds.). (2000). *Knowing, teaching, and learning history: National and international perspectives.* New York: New York University Press.
Terborg-Penn, R. (1980). Teaching the history of Black women: A bibliographic essay. *The History Teacher, 13,* 245-250.
Trotter, J. W., Jr. (2001). *The African American experience.* New York: Houghton Mifflin.
Voting Rights Act of 1965 (42 U.S.C. §§ 1973-1973aa-6).
Wheeler, W. B. (1970). Teaching Negro history in the public schools: Let's not repeat our mistakes. *The Journal of Negro Education, 39,* 91-95.
Winbush, R. A. (Ed.). (2003). *Should America pay? Slavery and the raging debate on reparations.* New York: Amistad.
Woodson, C. G. (1919). Negro life and history in our schools. *The Journal of Negro History, 4,* 273-280.
Woodson, C. G. (1962). *The Negro in our history* (10th ed.). Washington, DC: Associated Publishers.

AUTHOR

PERO GAGLO DAGBOVIE is Assistant Professor, Department of History, Michigan State University, in East Lansing.

All comments and questions regarding this article should be sent to dagbovie@msu.edu

This content downloaded from
165.106.105.118 on Wed, 05 Aug 2026 16:55:33 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms