

Using Internet Resources to Understand Race and Class in *The Well*

JEFFREY WENDELBERGER / SPRING 2004

Unit Overview

This unit is designed as an interdisciplinary unit that combines elements of Language Arts, Media Studies and Social Studies. Students will read a book, complete webquests, study U.S. history and create their own websites. The unit's primary purpose is to help students gain an understanding of the context of the book *The Well*. *The Well* takes place during the early 1900's in the Jim Crow south. It tells the story of the Logan family and their experiences with racism, poverty and community in rural Mississippi. In order to fully appreciate these issues, students must have an understanding of the social and legal pressures that permeated life in the Jim Crow south. Since these racial issues are still not resolved today, there are a number of different perspectives regarding the veracity of the history of racism in this country and the steps (if any) that should be taken to address racism. This need to understand the social context of the Jim Crow south, as well as the contemporary unresolved racial inequities, offer excellent opportunities for students to use technology, the media and inquiry learning to engage these issues. In addition to gaining context information for the reading of *The Well*, students will also gain important experiences in critically consuming and producing media. They will learn techniques that will help them analyze the quality of information on the internet. I created two webquests for students as part of this unit. One webquest will provide students information about the reparations issue that has circulated around our political landscape since the end of the Civil War. While participating in this webquest, students will also learn tools to critically judge the quality of information on websites. In the second webquest, students will examine the various social, legal, and economic conditions of the Jim Crow south. Finally, students will gain experience in publishing information on the internet by designing their own websites.

Activity Overview:

I. Webquest 1—Reparations/Judging the quality of web information

Teacher Introduction: Overview of Webquest Projects; timeline of African American History and reparations issues.

Teacher Lecture: Judging quality of information on the internet

Webquest: Students follow link: <http://www.kn.sbc.com/wired/fil/pages/webreparati.html>

Activity: Whole class discussion of Webquest.

II. Webquest 2—The Jim Crow South

Teacher Lecture: Introduction to the Jim Crow South

Discussion of social codes, laws, sharecropping, lynching

Webquest Activity: Students follow link: <http://www.kn.sbc.com/wired/fil/pages/webjimcrowje.html>

Activity: Whole class discussion using roles from webquest

III. Reading the book, *The Well*

Activity: Reading Groups or Whole Class Reading

Use of Roles from webquest 2 to provide contextual information

IV. Culminating Activity: Creating Websites

Media Lab Activity: Types of content—Audio files, text, links, video, interactive

Adding content to website

Websites should reflect learning about African-American history, reparations and race relations.

Explanation of Activities

Section 1—Reparations/Judging the quality of web information

Teacher Lecture: “The Big Picture”—Overview of Webquests, timeline of African-American history and Reparations issue.

Teacher provides a lecture that broadly discusses African-American history, with a focus on social history of slavery to the civil rights movement through present day race relations and reparations movement. This lecture is intended to provide a road map for the unit as well as a frame of reference for students and their understanding of major periods of race relations in the United States. Provide a timeline with major events. It will include ideas such as the beginning of slavery and its economic and social impact, the Civil War, Emancipation, Reconstruction, Jim Crow, the Civil Rights Movement and historical and present day calls for reparations. Provide overview of webquest project.

Teacher Lecture and Demonstration: Judging the quality of Web based information

Teacher provides a lecture and demonstration to help students understand the basics of using and the internet and critically examining information presented on web pages. Depending on the skills of the students, this may have to cover basics of web browsing such as using search engines, links and URL's. Teacher also provides a demonstration of how to judge websites. This demonstration would utilize **Handout #1—Guidelines for Critically Examining Websites** (see pg. 8). The lecture covers the various designations for commercial, education and government sites and how this may affect the truth-value of the information contained on the site. The teacher will also provide a demonstration of two different sites like www.chaser.com or www.theonion.com, which are satirical news sites that look legitimate and a site like www.nytimes.com. Students will be shown how by following links on the pages, looking for ownership information and other non-content information on the page they may discover important things about the affiliation of the site that may affect the truth value of its content.

Webquest 1: Reparations/Judging the quality of web information

Students follow this link to the webquest: <http://www.kn.sbc.com/wired/fil/pages/webreparatije.html>

In this part of the unit students will use a webquest around the call for reparations, the proposal that African-Americans who were descendents of slaves receive compensation for their ancestors' forced labor. The issue is implicit in the book *The Well*; it has been raised consistently since the Civil War and is still debated today. This webquest will also help students understand how *The Well* is politically and

socially relevant today. In addition, this activity will serve as an introduction to the internet. It will focus on helping students become critical consumers of information on web sites.

Students will work in groups for the first webquest project. Teams of two within each group of four will work to find information supporting and refuting the case for reparations. Students will adopt the perspective of the President and Vice President of the United States who must decide whether to recommend to Congress that it vote for or against a reparations bill, based only upon the information they find on the internet. In the webquest, two students from each team will search sites that have are mainly from educational institutions and advocacy organizations. The other two will search sites that include posts in a forum page and articles from a page that promotes a racist agenda. This website should be reviewed by teachers prior to its inclusion in the assignment. Some teachers may feel it is not appropriate for their students. The sites students will be asked to visit during this webquest are:

http://www.house.gov/conyers/news_reparations.htm

This site contains information about reparations and relatively current introductions of reparations bills in Congress by congressman John Conyers. It will serve as a reputable sight and all students will be directed to it.

<http://www.pbs.org/weta/washingtonweek/voices/200204/0422lawsuit.html>

This site is from PBS and provides relatively current information about a lawsuit against several Ivy League institutions that maintains they received endowments from profits earned from slave labor.

<http://academic.udayton.edu/race/03justice/AfAmlaw02.htm>

This site is from the University of Dayton law school and offers a bibliography of books and publications outlining legal reasons for reparations. Links on this page should be followed or items from the page can be put into a search engine and tracked down.

<http://web.africa.ufl.edu/asq/v2/v2i4.htm>

This site is from African American studies quarterly and contains links to 4 scholarly articles on reparations.

<http://www.usatoday.com/money/general/2002/02/21/slave-reparations.htm>

This link is from the USA Today site and contains an article that suggests it would be difficult to accurately determine who should pay for reparations. The site also contains links that should be followed for more information.

<http://www.thefence.com/pages/ourfence/message.asp?forumid=1076&messageid=21943&threadid=21868>

This site is from a commercial forum that users must pay to post on. The post is critical of reparations. The site should be examined to determine the truth-value of its contents.

<http://www.newnation.org/NNN-reparations-for-African-slavery.html>

This site contains dozens of articles about reparations and race relations. It looks like a quality site. Following links and careful reading reveals that this site is in fact run by an organization that promotes racist ideas. Information on this site is most appropriately viewed as propaganda. It can probably best be used to convey the fear and misunderstanding that exists among some people and how this aspect of the legacy of slavery and Jim Crow continues to influence people to this day.

While completing the webquest students will complete **Handout #1** in order to structure their critical analysis of the websites they are viewing. After students have gathered information and reviewed its quality the two factions will come together as a team and discuss the websites and the information they provided on the reparations issue. The teams will finally craft a “letter to Congress” with their recommendations on the issue. In their final letter to Congress they will have to justify their decisions by explaining the quality of information they received from their webquest. Students must give reasons for both the position they rejected, as well as the one they supported.

Whole Class Discussion: Reparations and Information on the internet

After students complete this project there will be a whole class discussion on both the reparations issue and the quality of information from internet sources. Students will discuss their experiences with judging the quality of information on web pages. Particular attention will be paid to the information from sites that are of dubious truth-value. In the webquest these include forum sites that allow users to write anything they want as well as sites that have obvious political agendas and which contain information that is not supported by information in more reputable sites.

Section 2: The Jim Crow South

Teacher Lecture: Introduction to the Jim Crow South

The teacher provides background information on the Jim Crow south. The lecture focuses on social and political conditions as well as the economic system of sharecropping. Each of these issues will be critical to students’ understanding of the book, *The Well*. The lecture should focus on the different perspectives taken by constituencies in the south, including landowners, sharecroppers, and white and black families. An important but possibly controversial issue that should be considered at this point in the unit is the crime of lynching. Lynching is a constant threat in the book (as it was in the Jim Crow south) and is something about which students seldom hear. I believe students should be made aware of this particularly vicious and terrible act and its prevalence across the American landscape. Teachers should use their own judgment and consult their own comfort level, parents and principal before deciding just how to use the following information, if at all. The website: <http://www.maafa.org/> contains explicit images of lynchings and can be used to provide students with a sense of the social nature of the act among whites and the constant fear it instilled in its potential victims.

Webquest 2: The Jim Crow South

Webquest Activity: Students follow link: <http://www.kn.sbc.com/wired/fil/pages/webjimcrowje.html>

Using the knowledge of getting information from the internet students gained from the first webquest, students will conduct another webquest. This webquest will be centered on the Jim Crow south and will provide specific contextual information for the book *The Well*.

Students will work with their groups from webquest 1. They will have two main objects. First, they will learn about the Jim Crow south and the ways in which it perpetuated the racism that became part of US culture during slavery. They will also adopt a more specific role of either a sharecropper, a landowner, a white family or an African-American family in order to become an expert on the effects of Jim Crow upon this constituency.

During this webquest students will be asked to visit three websites:

<http://cti.itc.virginia.edu/~aas405b/intro.html>

This is a site that gives an overview of Jim Crow and provides specific information about its effects on one town, Charlottesville, VA.

<http://americanradioworks.publicradio.org/features/remembering/>

This is a public radio site that documents the effects of Jim Crow on various constituencies where students will be asked to listen to audio clips of people who lived through the time of Jim Crow. Students should be directed to pay attention to the audio files on this site, as they will have a chance to create and post their own such files during the culminating project.

<http://www.jimcrowhistory.org/resources/narratives.htm>

This is a site that includes information and autobiographical data about Jim Crow. Students can look at the pictures of a biographical subject then read an account of their experiences with Jim Crow.

After the students complete a review of these sites they will be asked to do a search for a site of their own, using the knowledge of the web they have gained from the last two projects. Students will be encouraged to find a link from one of the provided pages or to do a google search and find their own quality page. Once again students will be asked to fill out **Handout #1** to track their understanding of how to judge the truth-value of all sites they visit.

These sites provide opportunities for students to get perspectives of different constituencies and the ways in which Jim Crow either worked to suppress or strengthen their position in society. These constituencies were chosen because they mirror those in the book students will be reading in the next section of the unit. Upon finishing the webquest, students will write a letter from their assigned perspective that explains their experiences in the Jim Crow south. This letter should be a retrospective look at events in their past (it will mirror the autobiographical data of the websites they explored). In this letter, students will post the website they found on their own as a recommended site for their peers to review.

Section 3: The Well

Activity: Reading Groups or Whole Class Reading

Students will begin reading the book *The Well*, by Mildred Taylor. Depending upon the reading ability of the class and the preferences of the teacher, there are at least two possible ways to conduct the reading of the book.

Reading Groups

The first possibility will work better with more advanced readers who are able to read and understand independently. For this type of class, have students remain in their webquest groups. Students should partner read and should be provided with a study guide that highlights and events teachers feel are important for the students' successful experience with the book. In this type of configuration, students will use their webquest experiences to act as experts within their reading groups on the effects of Jim Crow on white families, African-American families, sharecroppers and landowners.

Whole Class Reading

This is a second possibility for the reading of the book. For reading groups that are comprised of lower level or less independent readers, this method is recommended. The teacher will lead a whole class read aloud of the book. Teachers may decide to read the entire book, or depending upon the skill of the readers, the teacher may allow students to read as well. In this type of activity, the teacher will stop the reading and appropriate points in order to check for student understanding and to tie in the webquest work the students had completed prior to the reading of the book. An important activity for this reading method will be to have the webquest constituencies group together and provide their expertise to the class when their constituency is introduced in the book or when specific aspects of their constituency are important for the understanding of the action within the book.

Culminating Project—Web Page

As a culminating project teams will design their own web pages. Pages will be designed to pull together all of the information students learned during the unit. They will have information about the reparations issue, the Jim Crow south, and the book *The Well*. Students will work with their reading groups or their webquest team. At a minimum, each team will write a review of *The Well* and post it on their website. Each team will also post their letters about the Jim Crow south. They will also post their recommendations to Congress and reasoning from webquest 1. In addition, students will be expected to provide information for viewers regarding judging the truth-value of web content.

Student websites will also have multimedia components. Students will be expected to adopt the persona of a character in *The Well*, and provide a fictional audio account of that character's experience in the Jim Crow south. Students may also want to gather real photographs or create their own photographs of aspects of life during Jim Crow. Finally, they will be asked to include an interactive feature such as a poll regarding something from the unit. This could be a poll regarding the reparations issue, the Civil Rights movement, the book, or some other related topic.

Student creation of media is a critical component in this unit. This part of the project may require coordination with a building or district technology specialist, but it should be done to the degree that resources permit. In a traditional language arts unit this culminating project would serve as the publishing portion of unit. Publishing is important to allow students to see a use for their hard work and to share it with others. Publishing using electronic media is especially important in that it changes a student's relationship to the media. It takes them from consumers to producers and helps them to see themselves as having a stake in the growing media culture.

My desire to create this unit arose from several observations of my students. First, I have used this book for several years and it is always interesting to students and always provokes a lot of quality discussion about the history of race in the United States. However, I have always felt that my students have a very limited understanding of the complexity of the issue, its tendency to run through the very fiber of our

society and its relevance today. I believe that the webquests and other activities will provide a chance for students to discover much needed context for the book and so help them gain a greater depth of understanding of the book. This depth of understanding will also increase their enjoyment of the book and heighten the tension and drama they experience while reading it. Another concern I have has to do with observing my students and their use of the internet. I have always taught in Minneapolis Public Schools and many of the students who come to me have little or no experience with the internet. I watch as they struggle to type in URL's or fail to understand what a hypertext link is. I see them believe that pop-up advertisements offering money or free electronics are real. Often, those who have any experience at all only know how to access game, music or multimedia entertainment sites. I see very few students who have a good understanding of the internet and how to use it critically. This concerns me. I believe it puts these students, some of whom already come from difficult circumstances, even further behind peers in more affluent areas. I believe the activities in this unit will help these students to grow in their familiarity, comfort and ability to use the internet to empower themselves and improve their chances to be responsible contributors to our democracy.

Name _____

Handout 1

Guidelines for Critically Examining Websites

Check the URL. URL's that include .gov, .edu, or .org can be a sign that the information on the site is likely to be of higher truth-value. Record the URL's of the sites you visit:

Read the non-content information at the masthead, top, bottom and sides of the page. Do they reveal any affiliations or point of view? Does any of this information give you clues as to the nature of the content on the page? Record your observations of the websites you visit here:

Check links and affiliations on the website to gain information about the constituencies the site targets: Record your findings here:

Get multiple points of view about the issue and use your knowledge as a frame to judge the quality of this site's information. Do different sites seem to contradict claims or information on a particular site? Record your finding here: