



PODCAST TRANSCRIPT

Sample Lessons with Jordan Lanfair and Tamara Spears

HASAN KWAME JEFFRIES

I'm Hasan Kwame Jeffries, and this is a bonus episode of *Teaching Hard History: American Slavery*, a special series from Teaching Tolerance, a project of the Southern Poverty Law Center. In our last episode, we heard from Tamara Spears and Jordan Lanfair. Now, these two teachers are going to walk us through some lessons they created to explore the history of slavery with their students. We'll begin with a social studies lesson about understanding resistance and Kanye West, followed by an English language arts lesson that examines holidays as a way to help students understand the history and legacy of American slavery. I'll see you on the other side. Enjoy!

TAMARA SPEARS

I would like to share a lesson that I do on resistance and how I use current events—bringing the present into the classroom—to change up my curriculum. I was sitting on my couch scrolling through Twitter, you know, looking at the latest news, checking out what Black Twitter is saying, what is EduTwitter upset about? And then I saw Kanye West saying that slavery was “a choice.” I literally sat up, grabbed my fake pearls, and I was like, “How, Sway?” Then the reality of the statement really settled in, and how would my students be able to know this didn't make sense? Would they process it, or would they just take it at face value?

This happened right after we had finished a critical film study of *12 Years a Slave*, and my next lesson was to be the types of resistance that the enslaved used. I couldn't have picked a better statement for the kids to do the real work of doing history and understanding why it's important—not just to have the skill of research, but to actually use the skill of research. And looking at how this knowledge plays into what you know, and how does that make you a freethinker.

The New York City curriculum, Passport to Social Studies, which was created by teachers—I really like using some of the materials that they have because they focus heavily on primary sources. One of the lessons there—I kind of modify it for my own use—it's called “Types of Slavery.” And they talk about “What were the passive and active ways of resistance that the enslaved used?”

I let the kids watch Kanye West and the TMZ interview—not the whole thing, 'cause I think it was like 40 minutes. But just the part that we needed, related to when he said that slavery was “a choice.” And then we watched Van Lathan, the producer in the studio who challenged him and his thoughts. So I let the kids watch it, then I said, “We're not going to discuss this just yet. I need you to take out your journals,” 'cause I have journals for the kids. I said, “Please write down—what are your thoughts? What are you feeling?”

How do you feel about this statement that Kanye made? How do you feel about the rebuttal that Van Lathan gave?”

So, they write it down. And all of them are looking at me like, “I want to discuss, I want to talk about it!” One kid shouts out, “He needs to read more books!” and all of these things. And I’m like, “No, no. Not yet. Just, really, write it down. Get your thoughts on paper.” So they write it down. Then I say, I’m going to play two more videos for you. So I played Eve’s response—I think she was on *The View*—and she talked about bringing facts into your freethinking, and not just having freethinking. And then I play for them the will.i.am response where he was talking about if you’re going to have these thoughts, base them on research, and make connections to what’s happening today, and how these are not choices for the people that are living in these communities today. And he also brought up the point about disrespecting the ancestors, which one of the kids really grabbed onto.

So, I said again, “We can’t have a discussion yet. You guys have to really get your thoughts down on paper before you’re influenced by what anybody else thinks.” There’s one girl—I can’t really say her name, but I’ll just call her “D.” She was scribbling, scribbling, scribbling—so excited. She wrote like two whole pages before we even had time to get to discussion. After we watched those three videos I said, “Okay, now’s the time that we’re going to get into discussion.” So we had a discussion. And I also brought in an article, “The Most Damaging Myths About Slavery” by Yohuru Williams. I took excerpts from it. It was on the History Channel’s website. And he talked about the different ways in which there are these myths that come up time and time again. And even though Kanye thought he had some new freethought, it was actually something that has been used by white supremacists forever and those who want to say that Slavery was a happy situation for the slaves.

So I have them go through the excerpts from his article. And I have the kids really digest it. And after those two days, we got into the actual primary sources, because I wanted them to actually do the work themselves. I said, “Okay, we heard what other people had to say. Let’s hear from the enslaved and the way that they felt that they resisted slavery.” So I begin the class with our central question which is, “What choices do people make in the face of injustice?” We talked about the enduring understanding. The enduring understanding was: “Enslaved people resisted the efforts of their enslavers to reduce them to commodities in both revolutionary and everyday ways.” Again, we’re focusing on the passive and active ways of resistance. I start every class with these things.

And finally, we got to the aim: “How do we debunk the myth: slavery was ‘a choice’?” I tell the kids, “You know, this is again about you actually doing the history.” So the first primary source that we look at is called, “Josie Jordan Recalls an Outbreak of ‘Malitis.’” And I’ll just read a little excerpt for you to give you an idea of how we go through it. The first sentence: “I remember Mammy told me about one master who almost starved his slaves.” And so I pause. I say to the kids, “What does this tell you right off the bat? Who’s telling the story? How do we know that this person was not the actual person there?” You know, just a little inference. Then we move on. It says, “Some of the slaves were so poorly thin that their ribs would kind of rustle against each other like corn stalks drying in the hot winds.”

Now we talk about how the author paints the picture for us. “What does that tell us about the way the enslaver treated the enslaved?” So this gives us the condition, right? So the story goes on to talk about

how they called the master over, and all the hogs were laying out on the ground. And they told the master that the hogs had “malitis.” And they pretended like they didn’t want to touch it. So of course, the master says, “Well I don’t want the hog meat. I’ll give it to you slaves.” So then they eat it, and they have a great feast. So the story goes on to say, “Don’t you all know what ‘malitis’ is?” At this point, I stop and I say to the kids, “Do you understand what this story is saying?” Some kids, they get it right away. Some don’t. So we keep going. “And she would laugh remembering how they fooled old master so they get all that good meat. One of the strongest Negroes tapped the hogs between the eyes with that mallet. ‘Malitis’ set in mighty quick. But it was an uncommon disease, even for hungry Negroes around all the time.”

When they read this part, the kids crack up laughing. They say things like, “Oh!” or “Yo!” because they really realized that they tricked the master in order to get the food for themselves because they were so hungry. So we get right into the questions. And one of the first questions is: “What type of resistance is this? Is it passive or is it active?” And they have to get a quote directly from the reading that supports what they say.

Then we talk about the consequences. “Were there negative or positive consequences for these actions? Was it effective? Did they get what they wanted out of the action that they took?” And then this is when we get into the deeper work, where we talk about connecting this to what we’re looking to do: debunk the myth of “slavery was a choice.” So we say, “How useful or helpful is this primary source in providing the information about resistance of slavery by those who were enslaved?” And this is where the kids really can get into the deeper discussions.

The first questions are, you know, to set them up for understanding where they’re going in the learning, right? But this question is to really help them dive into can they actually use this document to support what way the person resisted slavery? And since this is the model document, kids are calling out the answer. We had answers like, “Yeah of course, this is perfect, because it shows that they can trick the master to get any kind of food that they want.” So then I bring them back to that last sentence. “This was uncommon, even though people were hungry all the time.” So, knowing that, could they use this method often, and what would happen if they overused this method?

Another thing, I want them to practice the skill of corroboration. So I say, “How does this primary source support what we saw in *12 Years a Slave*? Is there anything that corroborates it? How about when we read the ‘Debunked’ article?” So the whole premise of the lesson is bringing the kids to reading the primary sources, and then making those connections with the resistance and other secondary sources to have their own claim. Like, “What evidence would they use?” There are some other primary sources at this time. I put the kids into their house groups because I use a house system in my class. Each group has a separate document. There is one about Joe Sutherland who learned how to read and write by going to the courthouse with his master. Then he learned how to forge a seal. He’s selling you passes, and people are escaping. And then finally he gets caught. And then he gets sent “down south.” That’s what the narrator says.

There’s another article about Suki who resists her master’s advances. She’s making soap and, you know, he tries to come in. And, you know, he pulls down her dress and gets her to the floor. It doesn’t get much

more graphic than that. But she punches him, throws him into the soap, and the kids are cheering while they're reading. I'm like, "Okay, you must have got to the part [with] the soap." And then, she gets sold a few days later. So the kids, when they get to Sukie, they really think about Patsey from *12 Years a Slave*. And I say, "See, Sukie resisted aggressively, or actively, while Patsey was passive." And they're able to use the academic vocabulary to pinpoint the different ways that people resisted. There's also the Nat Turner—that comes with an excerpt about what happened, and it gives the engraving from 1831. And then the kids can analyze. So, you know, bringing some images into that as well.

After we do all of this work, and the kids are working together, and I go from house to house or group to group for better understanding to see what are they talking about. I throw questions out at them. I try to stump them. And I really saw the kids struggling with being able to look at, was the action effective or not? To me, that's gold right there, because I can see that they go back through their documents, they pull out their guide that they use from *12 Years a Slave*. They pull out their article about 'Debunked.' And they try to make the corroboration. So they really—I wouldn't say enjoyed, but—they really got into the work of doing the history themselves so that they can make the claim, and go back to Kanye and say whatever they wanted to say.

So that's when I bring the class together. We discuss what each house found, and we point out the things that people agreed with or disagreed with. And then I say, "Okay, let's get back to our journals." So I have them revisit the question. And now that they can pull in all of this different information from, not just what people told them about it from the secondary sources, but from the primary sources—and even though it's just three or four that we studied—it's enough for them to have an idea of their own about the resistance and the choices, or the false choices that people had to make. And we also say what is "a choice"? So that's when you can get into that whole idea of a false choice.

So once they're done with their journal entry, I have them do a writing assignment. They can even do an op-ed piece that can be on one of our fake magazines or I can give them a real magazine name and say, "This is going to show up in such-and-such magazine. You need to write an op-ed piece about what Kanye West said, and why or why not what he said makes sense." They can even do a string of tweets because, you know, Kanye at that time, he had like a ton of stream-of-thought tweets. So I say, "You know what? You're on Twitter. You're seeing what he's saying. You're going to respond to him." But, you know, Twitter has a format—I think it's 280 now—where each of your blocks has to be concise enough, which is more difficult than an op-ed piece because you have to get your point across within that little bit of words. Even though you're threading it, it still needs to stand alone. So some kids chose to do that.

And some kids said, "Well, can I just write a letter?" And I said, "Okay, that's fine." So I gave them those three options because that was the assessment: Could they actually do the work? Could they use the evidence from the primary sources and the secondary sources to come up with a claim and use those sources as evidence as to why they think that Kanye was wrong or he was right? Basically, how can we debunk the myth that slavery was "a choice"? And after we do that, you know, I read over them. Some kids wanted to share and we had another, further discussion. But, you know, I had to move the lesson along. And this is not something you can do in a 45-minute period. It just so happens that every week I have one double period. So you would use this as one of those longer periods, or you would break it into

chunks. So if I'm starting with Kanye and what he said, that was three lessons before I actually got to the lesson where the kids had the chance to respond, and write, and get into the primary sources.

HASAN KWAME JEFFRIES

This is *Teaching Hard History: American Slavery*. I'm your host, Hasan Kwame Jeffries. Teaching Tolerance recently launched another podcast called *Queer America* about how to teach LGBTQ history in your classroom. It's hosted by professors Leila Rupp and John D'Emilio. You can find our sister podcast *Queer America* in iTunes or visit tolerance.org/podcasts. Once again, here are Jordan and Tamara.

JORDAN LANFAIR

We use Columbus Day as an entry point to talking about the slave trade because we get to learn about his role in starting it. And from there, we're able to move into more complex conversations about—what was slavery? What is its legacy? How do we remember those who survived [as] slaves and how did they shape America?" So that's our entry point. That is a tangible day on the calendar that we can point to as someone who started the slave trade and everything that they stood for. So that's something that I use annually. We look at the proclamations from different cities that have changed the name of Columbus Day to Indigenous Peoples' Day.

I try to get it started about a week or a week and a half before Columbus Day. And there is a great article that I like sending home for annotation, "How Columbus Sailed Into U.S. History." And it's from NPR. And it talks very in-depth about how, essentially, this push came from Italians when they became Italian-Americans. And so they wanted someone who represented them. That is honorable. And we talk about, "Why might people want this?" Because one of the things that I don't do is just say, "This is bad." Okay? We need to understand—if it's been here for so long, why? Who's still fighting for it?

And so we kind of do some research, as homework after annotations and some work in class. And so, "Who is supporting this? What does that say about them? Do you think we should support it? Why or why not?" Then we look a little deeper. "Who might be hurt by this day? Anyone? Oh, why? You don't have to. You're you! You know this man started the slave trade. Well, maybe you didn't. But you know now. How will you feel when we have the day off? Of course, you'll have the day off, so that'll be fun. I'm looking forward to having a day off, too. But it's a day in celebration of this person. And so generally when we celebrate people, we celebrate the ideals along with them. Do you support those ideals? Hmm. Okay, so what could we do differently?" And then we look at the proclamations that have been written for Indigenous Peoples' Day. We talk about the vocabulary around that: "What is an Indigenous person? Chicago doesn't celebrate Indigenous Peoples' Day. What do you think about that? What are some ways that we could change that? Do you want to?"

And so then this takes us a few days because we bring in different nonfiction articles. Reading A-Z has a book about a student doing a project on Christopher Columbus and learning the truth that I use with my struggling readers. Front-loading a lot of information about who he was, so that we come to this clear understanding of, "If we're going to have this holiday, this is what we're celebrating. Here are other holidays. This is what, in essence, they're celebrating. These are the people that we are aspiring to and the values we are. So let me show you another one. Where does this fit with your current understanding? What do you want to do about it?"

For teachers who may be listening, this is—I mean, this is my Juneteenth lesson. This is the one that has it's—it follows the Columbus Day work that we do where. It comes generally after my students have done either a formal or informal debate. And the reason I station this after is because I want them to take a larger action about our school calendar. So I try to encourage them to push for our school calendar to be changed, or to write letters to the mayor about, you know, changing holidays. And so we focus in on Juneteenth.

I play the first about five or six minutes of the *Black-ish* episode based around Columbus Day because they have a skit about what Columbus did on the island of Hispaniola, which was begin genocide. And so I cut it right there, and we talk about, “How is he depicted? Based on what you know, is this accurate? Recall back to our past few lessons; do you believe that people get the full history when they look at holidays?” Then we just do a few quick review questions such as, “Well, what’s the importance of Columbus Day to its supporters? What holidays is it similar to? Okay, how might it be similar to St. Patrick’s Day? What do these groups have in common? Today we’re going to talk about another holiday: Juneteenth. Who’s familiar with it? Okay. Well, if I told you that we were going to talk about Independence Day, what day do you think I would talk about?” And of course, you know students, “July 4th.” “Why might that be a bit problematic? Why might that not tell the whole truth?”

Inevitably, you kind of poke, and prod, and guide them to, “Well, was everyone free on the Fourth of July? Okay, so what we’re going to look at is this episode that’s going to very much talk about this holiday. And then we’re going to have some conversations and questions. But this is just one day in our bigger conversation.” So we roll some more. There’s a pretty funny moment where Dre and his father confront one of the teachers by, like, “Well, why don’t we celebrate these other holidays, you know, like Magic Johnson Is Still Alive Day, Tupac’s birthday and then Juneteenth.” And it’s like, “Well, you should have led with that one.’ And so I always like to stop here and, “Would we celebrate Magic Johnson Is Still Alive Day? Should we celebrate Tupac’s birthday? Okay, so what is the importance of holidays?”

And this also calls back to a few conversations we have about, like, statues, and the artwork and, you know, who do we post, and who do we name schools after? So then we go through and we listen and analyze some of the songs that come up, including the “We Built This” song. You know, I ask, “What colleges and universities did you hear? Where do you notice many of them are? Okay, what happened recently?” And this was after the Charlottesville protests, also. And then there’s a point where they mention the legitimate dollar costs of slavery, and so we talk about that. “What are the costs of slavery? Huh. How old is the United States? If we assume that we were founded on July 4th, 1776—but how old are we? Okay, looking at some of the things that we know from history, does that make us an old or a young country? Okay, well how did we get the political and economic strength that we have?”

Alright, so add that in. Maybe not the dollar amount that they discuss, but, “What are some of the soft costs, we’ll say, some of the nontangible costs of slavery? How did America get to be who it is? Alright, on the flipside, what are some of the negative costs associated with slavery? What did it do to people? What did it make that might not be positive, based off of what you saw and what you know from your own experience? Okay.” And so then again we go through more of the episode. It is a lot of watching, and because *Black-ish* is hilarious, we do have moments where we enjoy so we can go deeper into the conversation, and it helps me pull them back out. And so at the end, one of the things that we focus on as

far as writing and then bringing into a full discussion over the next day or two is, “How do these holidays relate?” And one of the things that a student said that really stayed with me was, “We have a holiday for the man that started slavery, but not the end of slavery.”

To which you would say, “Why do you think that is? Hmm. What does he say at the end of the episode that you resonate with?” And because there’s, of course, this wrap-up, this summary. And I know for me, one of the things that Anthony Anderson’s character says is, you know, at least if we celebrated Juneteenth, it might feel like an apology. You know, like America actually feels bad about what happened. And then it mentions that there has been a formal apology issued, but it’s a half-hearted apology. “Yes, we’re sorry for slavery. But nothing really happened.” So then we move into inaction.

“Based off of the holidays that we’ve looked at, based off of what we know now, what are some things that we could do? Hmm. Do you think I should keep teaching this? Why? You all said you felt betrayed, like you didn’t know all of this, and people should have told you.” I had a student say, “You know, I’ve been in school this many years, and they’ve been telling me about this day, and I’ve been celebrating the wrong things.” And so, “What can we do to make sure that other students don’t feel that that’s not the case? Who has power that could change some of these things? How would we appeal to them? What’s your ‘ask’? Okay, let’s go ahead and try and take some initiative on that. Let’s move forward.”

And so then, the wrap-up is either a letter to someone who could change things. So we, of course, do the whole “Write your congressperson, write your mayor, write the principal, bring the principal in for your debates.” Because at least we can change it on our school calendar. So they can see those tangible results, but they are adding their voice to this larger debate as well. And that is kind of how that lesson goes. And it can expand anywhere from a day or two, depending on how deep the conversations get—how long the class period is.

TAMARA SPEARS

The use of *Black-ish* and the episode. When you are watching it with the kids, do they get tied-up? I know you mentioned that they laugh because it’s pretty funny. Do they get tied-up in the actual episode, or can they focus on the history of the episode?

JORDAN LANFAIR

It gets serious. It gets into the history. I like it because it gets into it in a way that is accessible for them, because it almost gets them just uncomfortable enough, just angry enough, just woke enough that we can keep the momentum going. And the conversations that we have are what drive them deeper into understanding. And because of that—for many of them, deeper into frustration. And so I find that pairing these really in-depth and hard conversations and questions with the episode that, you know, takes you through a multitude of emotions. The episode helps bring them back out, and that’s what I like. We don’t just go so deep into it that I can’t pull them back out.

We use current events to use our historical knowledge, to use our literary analysis skills, our writing abilities, the things that they learn in my class, to challenge the current system. And what that does is, it helps them not feel weighed down by history. If they don’t get to do something—at least for me, because

we look at the text a lot, because we look at history a lot, and we read firsthand accounts from people, we read heavy fiction—it can all just feel like this unbearable pain. But giving them the opportunity to challenge, and to resist, and to fight, and to grow helps them take that pain and turn it into action. And so that’s why I like to be able to bring in actual things that are happening that they can impact, so that they understand that it’s their responsibility to not allow these things to repeat themselves.

HASAN KWAME JEFFRIES

Jordan Lanfair teaches ninth- and tenth-grade multicultural literature on Chicago’s South Side. And Tamara Spears teaches social studies to sixth- through eighth-graders in Coney Island, Brooklyn.

Teaching Hard History is a podcast from Teaching Tolerance, with special thanks to the University of Wisconsin Press. They’re the publishers of a collection of essays called *Understanding and Teaching American Slavery*. Throughout this series, we have featured scholars to talk about material from a chapter they authored in that award-winning collection. We’ve also adapted their recommendations into a set of teaching materials, which are available at tolerance.org/podcasts. These materials include over 100 primary sources, sample units and a detailed framework for teaching the history of American slavery. Teaching Tolerance is a project of the Southern Poverty Law Center—providing free resources to educators who work with children from kindergarten through high school. You can also find these online at Tolerance.org.

Thanks to Ms. Spears and Mr. Lanfair for sharing their insights with us. This podcast was produced by Shea Shackelford—with production assistance from Russell Gragg. Kate Shuster is the project manager. Our theme song is “Kerr’s Negro Jig” by the Carolina Chocolate Drops, who graciously let us use it for this series. Additional music is by Chris Zabriskie. I’m Dr. Hasan Kwame Jeffries—Associate Professor of History at The Ohio State University and your host for *Teaching Hard History: American Slavery*.