Teaching About Haiti

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Teaching About Haiti is part of the Caribbean Connections series. Ideal for Grades 6-12 and Adult.
In solidarity with the people of Haiti, Teaching for Change is posting this 1994 *Teaching about Haiti* guide. While some of the demographic information is out of date, the guide offers historical and cultural information that remains relevant and useful. For more recommended resources for elementary and middle school students, visit our website.

**Teaching for Change**

www.teachingforchange.org

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Introduction

Debates about U.S. involvement in Haiti are spilling off the front page of the newspaper into the classroom. Students favoring intervention argue we should be involved given the harsh political and economic conditions in Haiti. Those opposed counter that with the increasing poverty and unemployment in the United States, we can’t take care of everybody. Multicultural lessons on respect for all races and cultures are undermined by these positions. Even though they might be well-meaning, both sides of the debate paint a “deficit” picture of the Haitian people and a good, powerful picture of the United States. It seems to go without question that the U.S.—the white knight in shining armor—can charge to the rescue. The only difference is whether it should.

The mainstream press and textbooks do little to help the students place the current crisis in historical or even contemporary context. For example, as is documented in *Studying the Media* (p. 17), the historical role of the United States is largely absent. This is no small omission since the history of Haiti has literally been shaped by the United States in the 20th century. Nor do we learn about the strength of the organized Haitian popular movement or Haitian culture.

Teaching About Haiti is designed to help students fill in the gaps in the news and their textbooks and to provide suggestions for further research. The following is a suggested framework for studying events in Haiti today:

(1) Haiti’s current crisis is best understood in historical perspective. Students can explore the forces which made Haiti the poorest country in the western hemisphere. Absent any critical analysis, students may agree with U.S. Agency for International Development (AID) official Lawrence Harrison’s (*Atlantic Monthly*, 1993) statement that, “culture is the only possible explanation for Haiti’s unending tragedy.”

History provides other explanations. Prior to the European conquest of Haiti, the Taino Indians practiced a diversified agriculture that provided food for all and was ecologically sound. African farming practices in Haiti, such as *Konbit* (p. 33) promote cooperation over competition. Students can compare these socio-economic systems to the dominant socio-economic order established how shortly after the conquest *Haiti’s History* (p. 5) in which (a) power was concentrated in the hands of a small, wealthy elite, (b) land and people were used, at any expense, to provide that wealth, and (c) Haiti became dependent on foreign powers for trade. In *Roots of Poverty* (p. 19), we see how the products of trade have changed, but the basic power relationships remain the same.

(2) The U.S. government has heavily influenced Haitian society in the twentieth century. This crucial fact is often left out of textbook and media accounts. For example the United States wrote a constitution for Haiti that included articles favorable for U.S. business; established, trained and financed the Haitian National Guard (precursor of the current Haitian military); trained many current military leaders; and provided financial and political support for Haiti’s dictators for decades. Nor do we learn about the active opposition by Black organizations, the peace movement, and church groups to the U.S. occupation of Haiti from 1915-34.
(3) Racism has been an important factor in shaping US/Haitian relations. According to a recent study of major U.S. history textbooks by University of Vermont professor James Loewen, not a single page suggests a relationship between racism and foreign policy. Using Haiti as an example, students can analyze to what extent racism has both influenced U.S. government foreign policy and how racism has been used to justify that policy to the American people. Refer to Haiti’s History (p. 5), Studying the Media (p. 17), and the Resource Guide (p.46).

(4) Popular movements play a crucial role in Haiti. Judging from the media, the only action the Haitian people take in their defense is to build rafts. Absent is any discussion of the powerful mass organization that elected Jean-Bertrand Aristide or the peasant organizations that continue to work despite brutal repression since the coup. The predominance of stories of the evil military or alternatively the suffering people leads students to say, “Why do we have to learn about this? It is so depressing.” The solution is not to ignore the topic, but to include the Haitian stories which inject hope into a discouraging reality.

Haiti’s history is a full of stories of people who have challenged the repressive government in every way imaginable. In Haitian Voices radio station operator Marie Yollete Val (p. 32) tells how military officers would come each week to broadcast their speeches. Unbeknownst to them she would turn their voices down and play music. Anit (p. 28) tells how she hid a pig to feed her family in defiance of the U.S. ordered slaughter of the entire Haitian pig population. In Haiti’s History (p. 5), we learn how thousands of people participated in a movement called Lavalas (the flood) to wash away the corruption of the past governments. They successfully elected their own candidate, Aristide.

These stories of powerful, ordinary people allow us to introduce a truly multicultural curriculum, a curriculum that goes beyond the heroes, food and holidays.

In addition to the sections mentioned above, students can refer to the sections on popular movements (Roots of Democracy, p. 23), collective farming (Konbit, p. 33), songs of resistance (Boukman Eksperyans, p. 40), and the community traditions of Vodou (Vodou, p. 38). The Folktales (p. 36) contain lessons for children about using their intelligence to challenge an adversary.

(5) President Aristide should be presented in his social context. Too often, the media focus on Aristide as an individual. Aristide came to power as a result of a popular movement. He was elected with an extraordinarily high percentage of the vote. The important changes made during his seven months in office were the result of an active collaboration between his administration and the Haitian people.

Frequently missing from the debate are the social policies he was elected to implement. These policies include an increase in the minimum wage, reform of the army, crack down on drug-running, and support for local development projects. It’s vital that students know about this broader platform if they are to think critically about the prospects for genuine reform in Haiti.

(6) A key concern is the role of the Haitian people in determining their country’s policies. Issues such as amnesty, economic plans and political leadership are being negotiated with minimal consultation with the Haitian people or their elected representatives.

A key question for students to examine regarding the future of Haiti is how and where decisions are being made. For example, in 1993, the Council on Hemispheric Affairs reported that U.S. special envoy Lawrence Pezzulo wanted to keep Aristide “on a short tether” and “insists that Aristide must enter into a power-sharing relationship with the military and his political enemies by broadening his cabinet.” Whose president is he? In addition, the role of AID, the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) merit close attention. These agencies receive little mention in the U.S. press but play a pivotal role not just in Haiti but throughout the Caribbean.

With this research under their belts, students can critically analyze their textbooks and the media. Refer to Teaching/Action Ideas (p. 43), and Studying the Media (p. 17) for suggested approaches.

Teaching About Haiti is designed to help students not only become more informed about Haiti, but also to become involved. The Teaching/Action Ideas suggests ways students can share what they have learned in the school and the community. Students can not only enter the debate, but also help to frame it.

We hope that Teaching About Haiti helps you and your students push beyond the traditional boundaries of inquiry into Haiti by bringing the voices and history of Haiti into your classroom. We welcome your comments.