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Teaching & Learning II

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Reflection on Stephon's Round

I had the pleasure of joining Stephon for a round at South Community High School on the afternoon of Thursday, November 19. Teaching his last period class of tenth-grade U.S. History students, I sat in to observe a lesson on the Haitian Revolution. I was excited to attend, since I have known Stephon from the very first days of freshman year at Clark. I was particularly impressed by the scope of his lesson and ideas he had for helping students access the material.

Stephon began the pre-round with some introductions and background. Essentially, students have been learning about the Federalist Era in the U.S. in order to begin thinking about the idea of historical truth. In this lesson, one of his main goals was to help students understand the concept of narrative and the notion that “certain histories are emphasized more than others.” His essential question of the day was on the board: “Was the Haitian Revolution inspired by ideas similar to those of the American Revolution?” He also asked students to consider why we rarely hear about the Haitian Revolution. The lesson began, and Stephon started with a short lecture (nine minutes) on Haiti. This included passing out samples of sugarcane for students to chew on. After the lecture, students broke up into small groups in order to spend the remaining half-hour cycling through stations with different historical documents from the revolution, such as images and primary source documents. He ended with a short debrief.

I like the amount of time Stephon devoted to the activity. The ratio of teacher-talk to student-talk definitely favored the students. After the lecture, students were able to break off into

small groups of five or six (he has a large class of 30). There, students cycled to three of five different stations, with a provided blank table with questions to answer about the perspectives of the document writers as well as other questions. I think it was a wise move to have the activity, especially with a large class at the end of the day. The ideas in the lesson and stations were powerful, especially when students were asked to consider both why they had never heard of the Haitian Revolution and what potential stories get left out of history textbooks.

Students were mixed on their willingness to engage with the lesson. I was disappointed to see the entire back row of students really ignore all directions. They seemed to sit in the back and talk with each other. In listening in to conversation, it turned out that many of these students were ELLs still low in English proficiency. I have seen in my own practice how challenging it can be to engage students who do not speak much of the classroom's language. I think the image-based documents would have been most accessible for these students. Perhaps assigning groups and having ELLs start with the images would be a good way to begin.

All in all, I enjoyed this early secondary rounds experience at South High. It was refreshing to see another MAT out of my discipline. I know that I had not heard of the Haitian Revolution, so I was able to follow along with the lesson. One thing that I will try to implement more in my practice is Stephon's ability to hold the students for a short lesson before releasing them to do their own work. This is a Best Practice principle that he has developed with success.