



Teaching About Ancient and Medieval Africa

Also
Racial Literacy Book Clubs in Middle School: Five Things to Consider

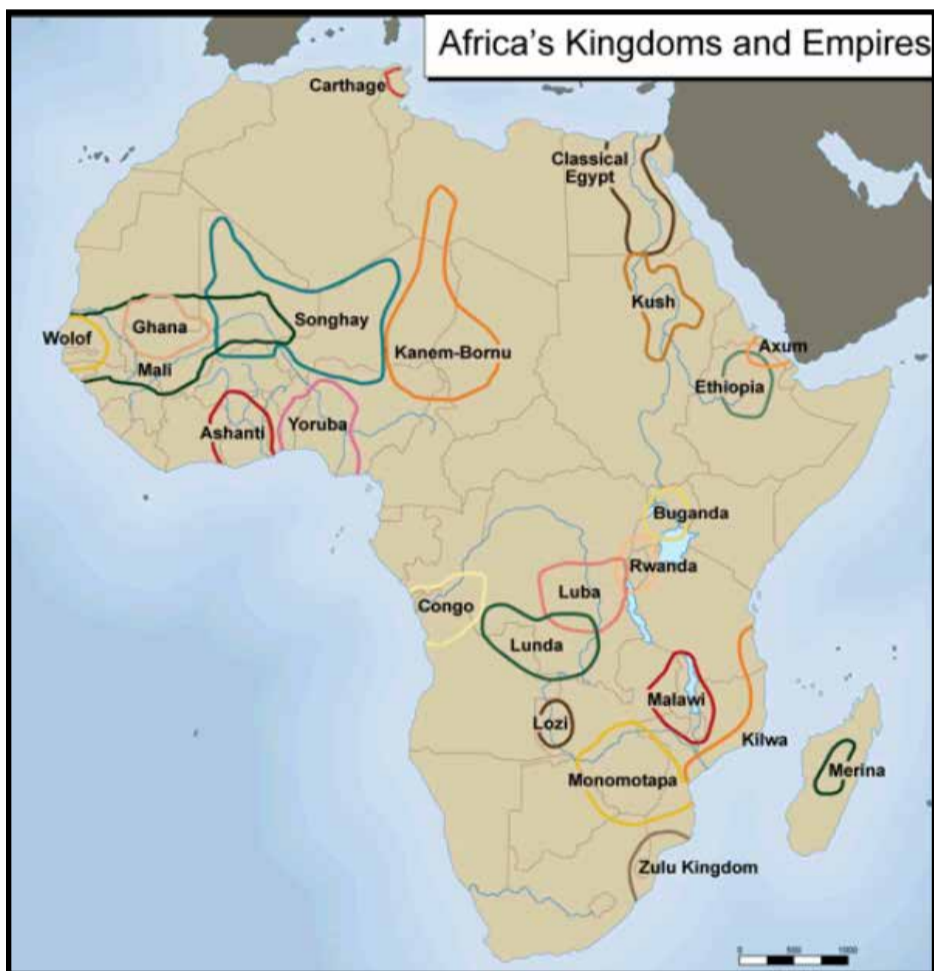
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Teaching Ancient and Medieval Africa with the History Bento Box Project

Anna Mariah Mills

I teach sixth grade World Geography and Ancient Civilizations in a small Massachusetts district that is predominantly white. Expanding my students' knowledge and appreciation of the greater world is one of my priorities. Our unit on Africa is one of my favorite units to teach. The depth of history, the multiplicity of languages, the variety of cultures and geography are very much in contrast to our school community. I revel in the expressions on my students' faces as they learn about the continent's expansiveness and complexity. In delving into the range of histories, I dispel the many myths and stereotypes that exist and explore African civilizations before European involvement and colonization.



Map courtesy of the Michigan State University African Studies Center
www.bu.edu/africa/outreach/teachingresources/history/kingdoms/

This year of living during a pandemic, with students learning remotely, has forced all teachers to discover new methods of teaching. My traditional Africa unit centered on case studies of six great ancient and medieval empires. I would present students with one-page readings ("case studies"), and they would work together on illustrated posters that summarized three main points. However, because I was now working with students both remotely and in class, I needed an approach that would allow for the fact that some of my students were in person and some students were at home. But I still wanted it to be something that was hands on. Teachers that I've con-

nected with via social media have been a great source of lesson ideas. On Twitter, I came across the idea of a history bento box project, created by history teacher Amanda Sandoval (@historysandoval), and reimagined my traditional unit on Africa as a bento box project.

History Bento Box

Like a bento box, the Japanese-style lunch box that divides food into different compartments, a history bento box divides information into separate parts of a Google Slide (the Google version of PowerPoint). This is a great way to present information and show understanding. Each part of the box can represent a different idea or concept that students explain as they present. Teacher Amanda Sandoval posted several versions of this template geared for high school students. The templates guide students to think "outside the box" and create a collage of images, GIFs, or quotes that they label with numbers on one side of a slide. The teacher poses a series of questions and tasks to complete on the other side. When I saw the history bento box idea, I knew this was something I wanted to try with my sixth-grade students.

The Bento Box Project is easy to replicate. It includes two sets of slides: the first introduces the bento box and the second is a template for students to duplicate and work with. The first slide set includes a slide for each of the following: an essential question, an overview of the project, the context, a timeline, key questions, tasks, and an exemplar project. The structure

ON THE COVER: A sixth grade student works on her history bento box about Great Zimbabwe. (Photo by Anna Mills)



Case Study Map

of the bento box introduction sets the scene for learning. It identifies learning objectives through key questions and has clear, concise directions for each part of the process. To make this project more accessible to any sixth graders who struggle with reading, I added a vocabulary slide that defines key terms for the case studies. I also added my own design for the map and case study slide. Another great feature of this lesson is being able to use direct links to the case studies. I adapted the original template so each number on a map includes a link, as does the name of the civilization in my key or legend. The bento box template helps streamline the number of clicks students use to get to the information.

Time to Adapt and Modify

The new 2018 Massachusetts social studies standards prompt us to dovetail history and geography in order to get a true sense of time and place. The first key piece of this lesson is a focus on the great empires of ancient and medieval Africa through the lens of the five themes of geography (location, place, movement, human/environment interaction, and region). We explore how geography affected the ancient civilizations of Africa. This includes desertification, climate change, and how geography influences cultural diffusion between civilizations.

In a pre-covid world, I would split students into six case studies groups: the great West African empires of Ghana, Mali, and Songhai was one group. The others were Ancient Nubia; Ancient Egypt; Great Zimbabwe; the Swahili Coast; and Axum and Ethiopia. When we start this lesson, most students have only heard of Ancient Egypt. Students would read and highlight the case study handout together. Next, they would summarize into three bullet points—one for location, one for cultural diffusion, and one for decline or “need to know”—how geography affected their selected civilization. Students would draw one



Bento Box Template

of the bullets as a group. Because of the pandemic, I could no longer have them draw a poster together in class, but the case studies and teamwork could be repurposed. There was no need to reinvent the wheel.

The focus of my lesson remained the same: to get students to understand the impact of geography on where people settled in ancient Africa. The key questions students need to answer address the benefits and drawbacks of choosing the specific location, finding examples of human environment interaction, and cultural diffusion between civilizations. I could reuse the six case studies using the bento box format. This allows students to dig deeper into the content and use more interactive visuals instead of drawing a poster. I could still have six groups, with two to three students per case study. I redefined my questions for students to answer and added them to the bento box template.

The hardest part of taking on this new project was adapting it to our hybrid schedule and making sure all students' needs were met. My A cohort meets in person on Monday and Tuesday; and my B cohort meets in person on Thursday and Friday. Wednesday is remote for everyone. Each cohort is split across three classes to keep in person class sizes small, and then we teach all the kids who are remote during our assigned remote block. Luckily, I teach in a small district, so my largest in-person class has 17 students. When they are all together for remote learning, I have about 40 in a Google Meet. We also have some students who are in person four days a week, which makes scheduling a group project a challenge.

To save time, I could have just assigned the groups, but student choice is important. So I created a slide for each class and checked the number of students I needed for each group. After discussion, we organized it so the four-day-a-week kids could work together for the most part. They could add in some



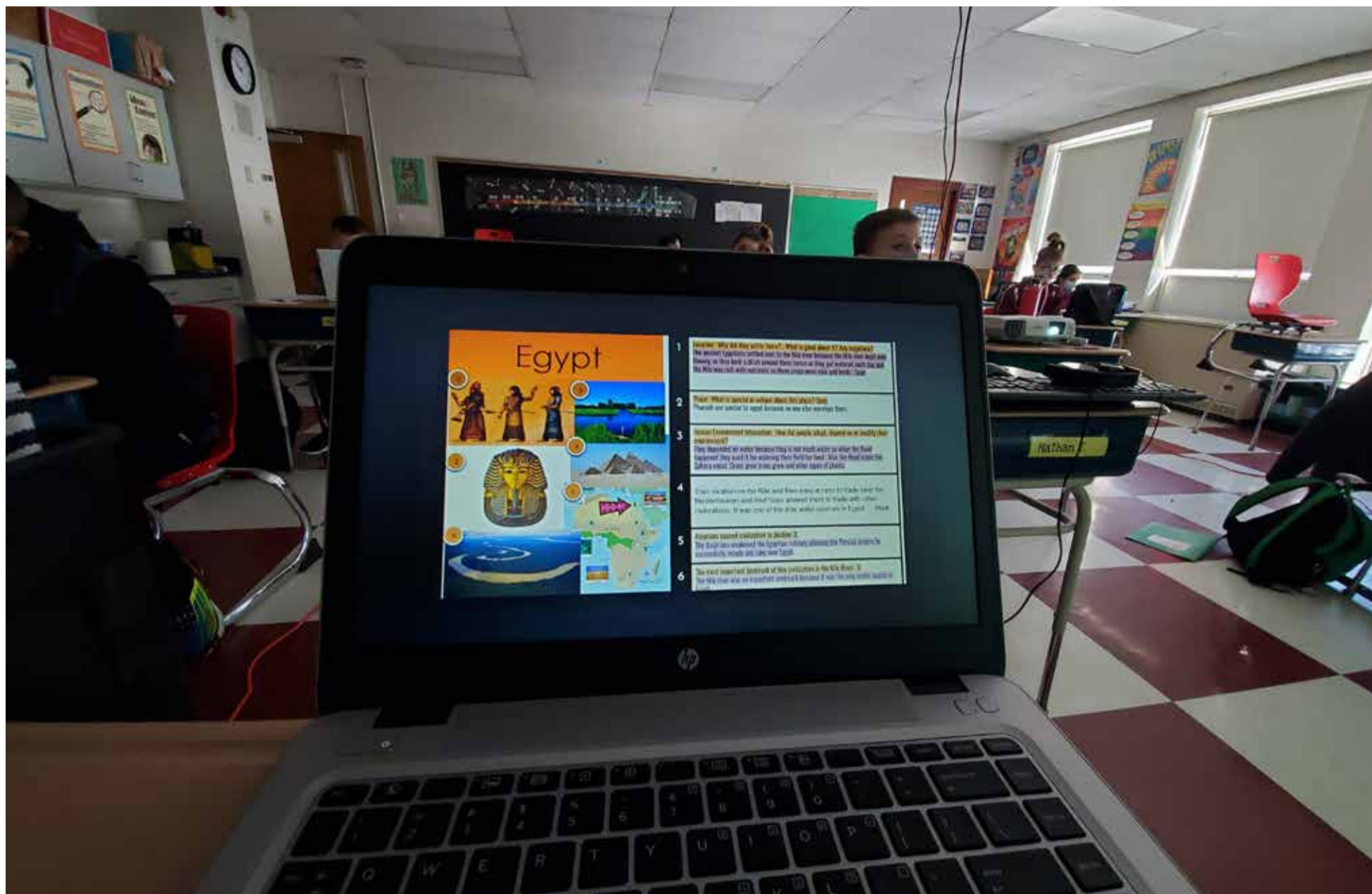
classmates who would be assigned part of the project to complete when remote, from home. It worked beautifully. Once I had my in-person classes set, when I went to my remote class, I could set up my other cohort classes.

I duplicated my slides for each class, to keep the four-day-a-week kids in their assigned group across cohorts. I selected the case studies assigned to each group, as some case studies are at different reading levels, by design. This method ensures that students' individual learning needs are met, and that they are included in choosing their group, without drawing attention to the fact that some students are in school four days a week because they need additional educational support (or are the children of teachers who need childcare while teaching). In my remote block, students find partners in their cohort and class and post this in the chat. Then I add students first by group and then by class to each slide. I was able to print off a list of everyone in the grade to check off during class when I did project check-ins and group presentations.

Once the groups were set, the group work began. One group member would make a copy of the template and share it with their partner and me, so that I could see what they were doing. Then they added a shareable link to the assignment so I could see how they were doing on their bento box. In the image

above (left), the student working on Great Zimbabwe is creating a shareable link. Having each student be responsible for turning in a shareable link in the private comments is key. Using a shareable link makes all group members responsible for turning in their own work, a desperately needed skill in hybrid and remote learning. The other great aspect of using a shareable link is that all group members can continue to edit the slides even if, for example, someone accidentally turns in work early without informing the group. Google Classroom, on the other hand, has a setting that prevents students from attaching a document created by someone else. The feature is intended to prevent plagiarism, but becomes problematic in the hybrid school model. If the creator of the slides turns in their work, it becomes impossible for their partners to edit the work. Also, staying six feet away from students made reading their small screens almost impossible. Having students begin by adding the link made it much easier to check in with students in person or remote. I am able to zoom in on my screen to give feedback without having to intrude into student air space while in person.

It was not easy doing a group project in the classroom. I tried to take it outside but Massachusetts in early February is freezing, so that was not the best option. My students improvised—they used their Google skills and typed comments back and forth




in their project when they were in person. My remote students definitely had the advantage because they could Face Time to read together or stay in Google Meet with my break-out rooms. I had six groups and six break-out rooms for my A, B, and C remote classes. They read the case study together and brainstormed what pictures would be good for their project. Then they added their work, and were ready to present.

Student Reactions and Work

My students immersed themselves in the project and were engaged in finding visuals to meet each requirement. All groups began their presentations by introducing their assigned civilization and pointing to its location by dragging an arrow on the map in their bento box. A favorite aspect of the project was the question focused on finding what was unique about a place and adding a GIF to highlight the most unique feature. Students had to think outside the box to find a GIF that demonstrated their understanding. For example, while studying Egypt, one of my students chose an animated King Tut mask to depict the importance of the Pharaoh. He explained that Ancient


Egyptians believed the Pharaoh had the power to control the Nile floods, which were the lifeblood of Egypt. Another one of my favorite GIFs was related to Great Zimbabwe. TED-Ed has an excellent animated movie about the history of Great Zimbabwe, the medieval city known as the Great House of Stone. Students found images online from the TED-Ed movie that had been turned into GIFs. My students working on Great Zimbabwe explained that the 32-foot-tall walls created to protect the city's large tower and town center were made of cut bricks that fit perfectly together.

This type of project leveled the playing field for all students. My special-education students, who are visual learners, got to showcase their savvy twenty-first century tech skills. Because I controlled the selection of case studies and gave choice for groups, everyone was included and had appropriate content. With a group project, each group member was responsible for answering two to three questions and finding an image for each. If someone needed help, they could ask a classmate or me. This was especially true in my remote block. Since they were in break-out rooms by case study, there were six to nine



Ghana

- 1 They settled in Ghana because it had very good resources like near rivers and close merchants. Something good about Ghana was that since they had all of the resources and gold getting what they needed was no problem. Something bad about Ghana is that because they were so rich they were a big target so muslims invaded and overpowered the king leading to the government declining. Also Ghana was damaged by the shifting of the Saharan trade routes and agriculture suffered as water supplies failed due to drought. E.M.
- 2 Something that is special or unique about Ghana is its Saharan salt and gold trade. This is special because salt is very useful and very valuable. You can use the salt to preserve food and keep from dehydrating. E.M.
- 3 They had to use their environment to help them survive. For example: the people of Ghana used their location to help them trade because they were near the Camel Caravan Routes which were a big part of trading. They had also traded gold for Saharan salt which back then was a big deal for surviving. This is a connection because these are the Camel Caravans which helped people with trading. B.S.
- 4 Trading was a big deal back in the day for Ghana. Ghanaians traded gold, ivory, and slaves for Saharan salt, Arabian horses, etc. Salt was a very big deal as well because it was not found in Central Africa. It was also needed to preserve food and keep from dehydrating. Sometimes it would be traded for GOLD! That's crazy! Sometimes salt merchants would travel for months to get to Ghana. This would be called the Saharan salt and gold trade. Another example is they adopted Islam through trading. B.S.
- 5 Ghana declined because Muslim people invaded the civilization and also the economy declined because there was a big drought. It connects to the question because they lived half in the Sahara but it used to have lakes and water but there was a big drought so now it's a desert. N.T.
- 6 The most important landmark is Koumbi Saleh. It is important because this is where all of Ghana's gold was stored and the King lived here too.



people to brainstorm with across classes in order to figure out what information and images were essential. My advanced students also got to add more detail to their slides to show their understanding of the harder concepts about human environment interaction and cultural diffusion. As students answer each part of human environment interaction, they choose an image that shows how their civilization adapted to, depended on, and modified or changed their environment. To demonstrate cultural diffusion, students pick an image that shows how ideas were passed between civilizations. Our Ghana group went above and beyond to explain each point, and it barely fit on the screen. I was very proud of the choices each group curated to make their project.

Assessment and Feedback

For assessment, I wanted to make this project as easy to grade and equitable as possible. My rubric had four criteria: Requirements (4 points), Accuracy (3 points), Presentation (2 points), and Group Participation (1 point). This ensured that the focus was on the content but also held students accountable. Each student added their initials to the parts of the presentation that they completed, so that I could grade the project individually if needed. The originator of the slide presentation created a shareable link, which made presentations easy to assess without my having to track down the originator to review the presentation in Google Meet. When all members of the group turn in a shareable link, it is easy to go to the first person alphabetically by last name and click the link (which loads faster than the Google Classroom Assignment Viewer). I printed out a copy of "My Group" Google Slides on one paper,

and checked off each group member as they presented their part. I stepped in for students who were not present during Google Meet or in class in order to make presentations flow across cohorts. To be efficient, I graded the projects as students presented using my Google Classroom rubric.

Overall, my students really enjoyed this project and provided great feedback. They suggested I add YouTube videos to the case studies, since I showed them videos after the projects were presented. They suggested I only share the template that they need to make a copy of on Google Classroom, rather than both the introduction slides and the bento box template. They liked that I included fail safes into grading projects in case their partners didn't finish their part on time, a chronic issue of hybrid and remote learning. My students also suggested planning on adding an extra day to check in with students who did the project mostly remotely so that they could have some in-person face time with the teacher (since the break out rooms were so big).

Conclusion

With little warning, the COVID-19 pandemic forced us all to transform our teaching methods and learning routines. Even though I knew it would take some work to adapt my unit on teaching African civilizations before European colonialism, the Bento Box Project fulfilled my goals of providing students with an engaging and hands-on lesson.

I was able to find this project and other innovative teaching ideas by connecting with teachers through Twitter or organized online conversations (chats) like #worldgeochat, #sschat, and #6thchat. These have been indispensable in help-

ing me grow as an educator. If you're on Twitter, I recommend following Amanda Sandoval (@historysandoval), Mrs. Byars (@mrsbyarshistory), and Stacy Yung (@Stacyyung).

For those who are not on Twitter, most of these Twitter chats have websites or wakelets (<https://wakelet.com/>) to explore. One of the most influential sources in helping me redesign my Africa unit was Chris Heffernan's (@cheffernan75) #worldgeochat blog post: "Teaching Africa without all the Sadness" (<https://worldgeochat.wordpress.com/2017/04/03/teaching-africa-without-all-the-sadness/>). The #worldgeochat archives also have tons of resources for every topic, as does the #sschat archive (see Teaching Resources). I also connect with teachers via Facebook groups like the Social Studies Network group of 11.8k teachers run by Gabriel Valdez (@socialstudi-

estx) and the 6th grade Ancient History Social Studies Teachers Facebook group. These groups are useful to post questions or to search for resources for planning your next activity or unit. If you're not a social media enthusiast, National Geographic Education (www.nationalgeographic.org/education/) has an incredible database of resources, lessons, and maps that can help you add geography content to your next unit. 🌍



ANNA MARIAH MILLS is a Sixth Grade Social Studies Teacher at the Howard School in West Bridgewater, Mass. You can reach her at amills@wbridgewater.com or on Twitter @AnnaMMills.

TEACHING RESOURCES

Africa

African Studies Center, Boston University, Kingdoms of Ancient and Medieval Africa, www.bu.edu/africa/outreach/teachingresources/history/kingdoms/ and Resources for Teachers www.bu.edu/africa/outreach/teachingresources/

Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Africa's Great Civilizations, 6-hour series, www.pbs.org/show/africas-great-civilizations/

Waklet on West African Kingdoms by Howard University, <https://wakelet.com/wake/ya7M8JiLkIZUzCcYoRfnc>

Mr. Nicky: West African Empires (Hip hop song & history mixed), www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Vnu8pL8KPs

WBUR, "MFA Exhibition Tries to Correct the Misrepresentation of Ancient Nubia," www.wbur.org/artery/2020/01/14/mfa-exhibition-ancient-nubia-now

BBC documentary on Nubia: Kingdom of Kush - History of Africa with Zeinab Badawi, www.youtube.com/watch?v=CwaP1kyAqqo

TedED- Great Zimbabwe "Who Built Great Zimbabwe? And Why?" by Breeanna Elliott, www.youtube.com/watch?v=quzjmZ-7s6w&t=2s

Swahili Coast Waklet, <https://wakelet.com/wake/dWjaZJKeNu89UuJNkANLu>

BBC documentary: The Rise of Aksum - History of Africa with Zeinab Badawi, www.youtube.com/watch?v=A40SEpexs_Q

Chris Heffernan, "Teaching Africa without all the Sadness." The #worldgeochat archives (April 3, 2017), <https://worldgeochat.wordpress.com/2017/04/03/teaching-africa-without-all-the-sadness/>.

General

"Bring National Geographic Resources into Your Classroom." National Geographic Society, National Geographic Education, 2021, www.nationalgeographic.org/education/.

Social Studies Network Facebook group: www.facebook.com/groups/socialstudiesnetwork/

#sschat archives: <https://sschat.org/archives/>

#worldgeochat archives: <https://worldgeochat.wordpress.com/the-worldgeochat-archives/>

Racial Literacy Book Clubs in Middle School: Five Things to Consider

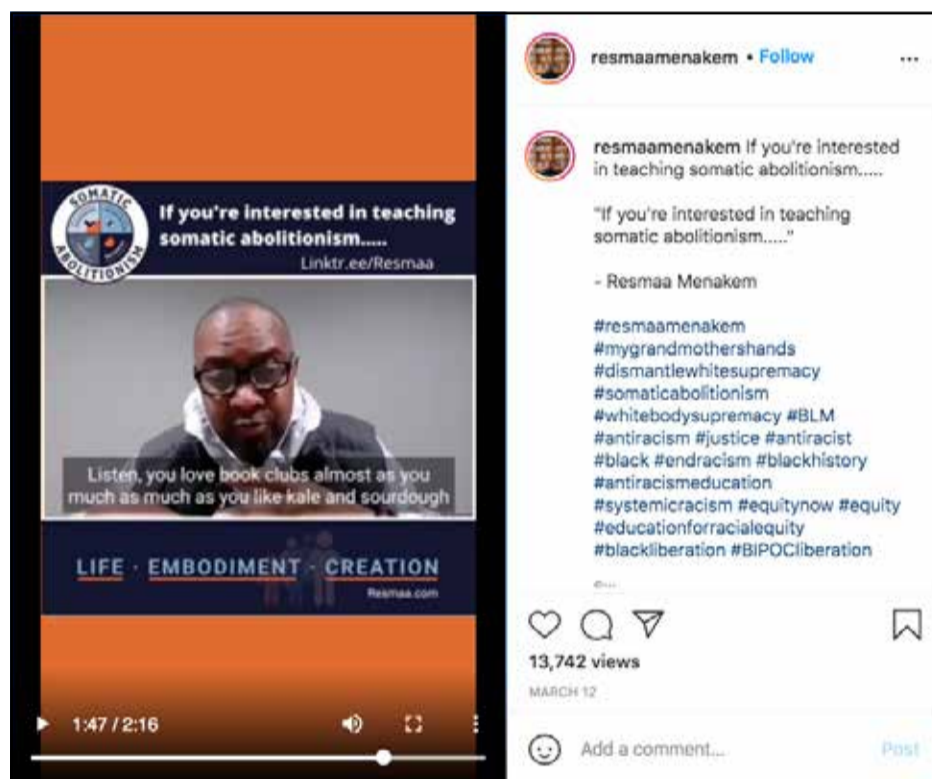
Joanna Batt

Racial literacy book clubs are spaces in which teachers and students can engage in “self-reflexivity and critical dialogue about race.”¹ They should be spaces that challenge unequal distributions of power, not passive spaces from which to virtue signal or metaphorically dust off one’s hands once the club’s weekly hour is over.² For two years prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, I led a book club focused on racial literacy in education (i.e., a club that encouraged the “knowledge, skills, awareness and dispositions to talk about race and racism”³). It was a space for student volunteers and myself, the moderator, to engage in conversations around difficult histories, current events and race and racism. It was an educational environment where social studies tenets of culture, civics, geography, economics, and history were recognized as intrinsically tied to systemic racism.⁴ It was a space to deepen antiracist thinking and action by sharing truths as a collective, with a great deal of help from an outside book.

I strove to co-create this space with a group of brilliant, curious, and compassionate sixth graders. I did this because I was honored to spend time with these 11- and 12-year-olds. But I also did it because of the high cost, in our local communities and greater country, of not having the hard, unflinching discussions with young people about racism.

In the wake of the deaths of Ma’Khia Bryant, George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Daunte Wright, and countless other Black and Brown citizens; the increase in attacks and murders of Asian Americans including Daoyou Feng, Hyun Jung Grant, Suncha Kim, Soon Chung Park, Xiaojie Tan, and Yong Ae Yue; and the thousands of mostly Latinx immigrant children and families in crisis at our border, it’s clear that avoiding racism as a topic isn’t working.⁵ We cannot let fear of controversy stop us from speaking about this issue with young people. Racism is in schools already. The least we can do is call it out and break it down with our students. It is our responsibility to do this work, not just as outside volunteers, like me, or teachers, coaches and counselors like you, but as citizens who know young people deserve spaces to engage with the truth about our nation’s racist past and present.

Creating a racial literacy book club should be carried out with thought and care about how it will impact students, with a focus on uprooting oppressive systems. Otherwise, there’s a great risk of generating harm, especially to students of color in the group. As a white educator, my work was multi-layered: I needed to check my privileges, to constantly question why I was doing this work (it could not nor should not center on



Resmaa Menakem, “If You’re Interested in Teaching Somatic Abolitionism,” Instagram (March 12, 2021), www.instagram.com/tv/CMVHVImH5-Y/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link.

me), and try to unlearn the white supremacy I benefit from. Educators of color may still need to mine internal biases as they challenge external ones, as well as to consider their own well being and boundaries in the book club space. The experiences I share are only my own, as are my guidelines—everyone’s club will and should be different, based on your own identity and the needs of your particular school and students.

A racial literacy book club cannot snuff out racism. But it might help your students think more deeply about their responsibility to try. Here, I share my biggest takeaways since founding the

club with the help of school educators, administrators, and parents. I outline what went well, what must go better in the future, and most of all, what needs to be present in a club that takes on racism with middle schoolers. This is by no means a checklist—lifelong antiracist work isn't quick or easy. It is instead a set of things to reflect on before you open a book on race with a group of preteens.

1. Humanity first, knowledge second

Student volunteers for this club will expect to learn something about racism. Everyone who attends *should* become more actively knowledgeable in understanding their mission to recognize, then dismantle, the systems of oppression that we all live with in different ways. However, the goal of obtaining knowledge is a distant second to respecting students' humanity, personhood, and belonging.⁶ This must undergird the entire club. I had to go beyond intentionally setting up an equitable space and thinking deeply about who my attendees were. We had to aggressively resist any expectation that a person who experienced racism was there to teach others, or that a plotline in the book didn't have real life implications. As moderator, I reminded students each meeting that nothing we discussed was theoretical or experienced in the book alone. The material we covered was real and lived; therefore, nothing was up for debate when it came to Black and Brown lives mattering. I was clear and firm that no space existed for verbal sparring, dispute, or deliberations such as "What do you think? Should this character have been stopped by the police?" It was not a space to discuss if anyone deserved basic humane treatment. It *was* a space to examine why anyone, for example, gets racially profiled by the police. We began with the indisputable premise that racism exists. Early on, we explored race as a social—not biological—construct created by white supremacy, that nevertheless has very real, material consequences, which reproduce and change, but never seem to go extinct.⁷ The club's task was studying why; first discerning the cunning, devastating ways racism shows up that students may not have registered, and then brainstorming ways it could be eradicated.

For these discussions to work, we had to remember that what was new on the page for some students was lived for others. A new concept for a white student was perhaps not new to a student of color. Explorations of microaggressions such as name mispronunciations weren't simply facts, but something that affected some students in the group personally. I also

had to model not making assumptions about certain students' experiences because of their race.

One person's "a-ha" moment should not be someone else's moment of suffering.⁸ When one student wanted to query out loud how an aspect of racism might feel, it is not always best for the emotional health of others to answer. I'm not speaking about the discomfort of white students chipping away at their privilege. I'm speaking about students of color who could potentially be retraumatized around a racist issue. Every child must have their dignity honored in the space.

In this context, it was helpful to discuss the difference between our intentional brave space (where everyone's humanity is protected, but issues might make us feel uncomfortable and push us to our edge of understanding/experience) and a safe space (where the expectation is feelings will never be hurt/discomfort never experienced).⁹ It was also useful to establish code words that could change the subject, without question or explanation. This was helpful for when students felt overwhelmed, or like something was too close to home. Let's say the code word we picked was *grapefruit*. When a student interrupted a discussion with "I'm calling *grapefruit*"—and they did more than once—it was my job to follow with, "Hey, let's take a break from discussion and free write/share weekend plans." Afterwards, I'd check in with that student privately. This wasn't graceful every time. What's more, none of it would've worked if we didn't have trusting relationships with each other.

Lastly, centering students' lives in this space meant remembering that things didn't stop when we did. Students might be deeply impacted by our talks and then take those feelings into the rest of their day. More than once, I wished I had allotted extra "decompress" time so that we weren't left wrangling with a particularly tough moment when the bell rang. If I spotted big, unresolved emotions on a student's face, I knew I needed to check in then and there, and the following week. Also, when I noticed that something had been especially hard for someone, I tried to protect privacy, while letting teachers or guidance counselors know that student seemed triggered. I was responsible for what was raised in the space and how it affected all students, especially students of color, given the racialized context of discussions.

2. Invite a text to be your guide

The text our student book club used to dive into racial issues—from gentrification to interracial dating to Black Lives Matter—



was Angie Thomas's *The Hate U Give*. It took some planning and scaffolding with school educators (who offered essential communication to parents, given that the title's maturity rating is higher than sixth grade). Because students wanted the book (the recent movie release helped) and because an adult would be present for guided reading, everyone got behind our pick. If you're thinking, "my school would never allow this!" or "a Z+ book with 12-year olds?!" I understand. Our experience was unique. Which exact book you read isn't the main point. We chose ours based on two musts: (1) the book was something that students cared about and wanted to read; (2) it was authored by someone who identified as a member of a historically marginalized group, an author who has experienced the issues around race and racism that we would be discussing (i.e., #ownvoices). *The Hate U Give* is 444 pages. Factoring in the scaffolding and our discussion time, we spend the entire year on the one book.

Classics like *To Kill a Mockingbird* have value, but are still white-authored and usually centered around white lives. It's important to be deeply intentional about the book choice and

to understand that if your group is going to engage critically with racism, then your text must be authored by a person of color. The options for powerful, antiracist reads by BIPOC, Latinx, AAPI, Arab American and other authors are limitless. Such texts can vitally counter-storytell and center those whose "voices and perspectives have been suppressed, devalued, and abnormalized."¹⁰ Ask (and borrow/purchase from) librarians and local bookstores for collections of antiracist titles for young people and find out which books other teachers have had success with (see NCSS's *Notable Social Studies Trade Books for Young People* published in each May/June issue of *Social Education*). Some stores, like Powell's Books, have specific Antiracist Reading for Kids sections; other stores are explicitly founded on premises of diversity and inclusion like BIPOC-owned Black Pearl Books.¹¹

Know your students. If they're deep in sci-fi fandom, Nnedi Okorafor's horror/Afrofuturist *Binti* might be the ticket. Sara Farizan's *Here to Stay* might attract sports buffs. Graphic novels such as the late Congressman John Lewis and Andrew Aydin's *March* trilogy, Jerry Kraft's *New Kid*, and Gene Luen Yang's *American Born Chinese* aren't just electric, but can pull multiple reading levels. *Black Enough: Stories of Being Young & Black in America*, edited by Ibi Zoboi, offers a variety of voices and narratives. Other fiction picks are plentiful, like *Hearts Unbroken*, by Cynthia Leitich Smith; or *Mexican WhiteBoy*, by Matt de la Peña. But don't overlook powerful non-fiction such as: Jason Reynolds and Ibram X. Kendi's *Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You*; Tiffany Jewell and Aurelia Durand's *This Book Is Anti-Racist: 20 Lessons on How to Wake up, Take Action, and Do The Work* (with dazzling illustrations); and 2022's upcoming *A Black Women's History of the United States for Young People* (the latest in the ReVisioning History for Young People series which includes Indigenous and queer collections), by Daina Ramey Berry and Kali Nicole Gross. These are just a few.

Lastly, selecting a strong text for the club does not mean the book does the work for you. However, letting these books act as architects for discussions is essential. For our group, sharing a common BIPOC-authored text not only provided a foundation and shared source for discussions but provided support when uncomfortable conversations came up. When they did, students who did not understand racism as intimately had someone else's textual story to guide them towards radical empathy (rather than inadvertently placing a "teach me" burden on a classmate).

Students who *did* know racism intimately had a way to talk about these issues through the characters of the book. The shared experience of the book's content brought together very different students in one discussion—while avoiding an unwelcome burden for students of color to share personal experiences. For instance, at times it was much easier for a student to talk about how Starr, the book's main character, felt in a racist situation, rather than share that they had in fact been in a similar one. It created an "avatar" of sorts, through which real feelings and experiences could be discussed. Using a book to root us, instead of freestyling, enabled some distance. This created healthy boundaries for students of color and a way to bypass having their own lives be another person's learning experience. When students did feel comfortable directly sharing from their lives, events in the book created an on-ramp for conversations like "hey, this isn't just in the book, this happened to my friend/my mom/me."

“Students are up for this, no matter the grade level. They have so much to say.”

3. Build community, then talk race

It's a messy thing to examine ourselves and the racist systems we've grown up with. This project may not have been successful if I hadn't gotten to know my group—and if they hadn't known each other. I was vulnerable with them about my own experiences, mistakes, and unlearning. They watched me mess up more than once. I had to seize these as learning moments, model accountability, and talk about why I wanted to do better. Thus, they learned from an adult that this work is never done, that they will also mess up, and that that's never permission to shirk responsibility from continued antiracist growth.

This meant we spent *a lot* of time in the beginning getting to know each other. We sat in a circle—to encourage conversation and to symbolize that all shared confidences stayed in our circle, even though our work continued beyond it. We told each other that we were figuring things out and that we must treat each other with respect. My first year, I set aside ample time to

bond before we opened the book. My second year, I rushed our time in the beginning, with poor results. I reminded myself that we had to know and trust one another, and *then* move into our difficult conversations. Crafting community norms helped, as did having them handy for cues when needed.

I also found it important to be clear and intentional about why we were all here. Early on, we asked, and answered together, why we considered it important to have the club. These "why's" were fundamental in grounding us. Yes, we gobbled ice cream sandwiches before they melted and had impromptu Greek chorus film reviews when a new anime release dropped. But we were there for the needed reason of talking about racism, something that lived in the school we were in, the world we traversed, and the book we read together. When moments strayed from this? I would read from our students' "why's," which we had put together in the beginning, to bring us back. Because we met outside, I kept their answers on my phone to read from. If I were using my own classroom, a big student-made poster would be up for reference.

Honoring all of who we were in community also means honoring intersectionality. As Audre Lorde said, "There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives."¹² Our club had to follow suit and dig into racism outside the Black/white binary. I made sure our book addressed layers of racism that intersect and multiply with gender, sexuality, disability, religion and more. Our book choice focused on the BLM movement and also was relevant to students' lives due to their own interests and racial identities. But there are clearly issues affecting other groups, and also celebrations and conversations around what it means to be biracial/have multiple racial identities (Afro-Dominican author Elizabeth Acevedo's books, like *The Poet X*, amplify this dynamically).

Lastly, seeing our complex community for what it was meant not underestimating or overestimating students' prior knowledge. In our first meeting, students shared why they were in the group, what everyone knew about race and racism, and what they hoped to get out of the club. I had students write their answers anonymously on blank scraps of paper, assuring them I did not know anyone's handwriting yet. From that moment, it was clear: while some history might be missing around certain events for students, their lived experience and home knowledge was not.¹³ They each had familial and community experiences that were present long before the book

club. White students in the group might not have been as aware of racialized experiences, but lived in a world that upheld their supremacy, a different kind of racialized knowledge. While all the real-world experiences were no doubt different and had to be treated as such, everyone had their own unique wisdom. I say this to impart that students are up for this, no matter the grade level. They have so much to say.

4. Self-examine, *listen*, and don't suppose

It was imperative that I never assumed anything, listened deeply, and most of all, asked myself: what biases of my own do I need to excavate before discussing racialized issues with young people? Critical self-reflection needed to happen not just once, but each day that I led the club. As a white woman, I did not engage in this work because I found myself the most qualified to do so—far from it. I did it because it is simply everyone's work to do what they can, as well as they can, in the fight to make schools antiracist spaces.

This meant I was a champion, not a savior.¹⁴ I was learning with my group as a moderator, not a teacher. My role was to support, ask questions, reflect on my own positionality and pedagogy, and occasionally open candy wrappers. I was there to listen. This was a student space and I was just living in it. There were days when I envisioned a chapter discussion going in one direction, but then a student would get hung up on a small but big detail in the dialogue, and off we went in another direction. I went—not always elegantly—where the group needed to go. In order to do this, I had to listen to what begged for more discussion. And when I didn't know what that was, I asked. What were students unclear about? What still bothered them? Most days, this was most things ... racism doesn't wrap up tidily, or at all.

I also had to fight the urge to constantly share historical background on the issues we discussed. When it was integral to the book plot, I did bring in articles and outside videos to give greater historic context to our discussion. But I had to remind myself: this was not a class. This was a space where students had given up their lunch hour, where the very nature of it being *different* from class made it effective and meaningful. No one was there because they *had* to be, and no one was there to show off answers, including myself. We came together to better understand racist systems and each other. We talked a lot about empathy, but something we did *not* do was suppose we were characters in the book. We talked

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about how characters felt based on text. But questions like, “how would you feel if you were Starr?” were neither helpful nor equitable. It would mean asking students who weren't a Black young woman to don someone else's life, in all its beauty and challenge, and pretend it was theirs. That would mean white students trying on a BIPOC identity for an hour, only to easily take it off after.¹⁵ It would also perhaps unintentionally imply that all students of color are monolithic and must feel and live like Starr. This was too close to a simulation, and a slippery slope to supposing that we knew how others felt even though we had not walked in their shoes. Instead, we talked about how reading a scene made *us* feel, and asked questions like: What systems are to blame for this chain of events? How do these systems show up in our local community? What did Starr do about them? What can we do about them?

Sometimes, things were too tough for us to grapple with in the moment. In those times, I let students journal to some music; or I tried to ensure BIPOC students didn't bear any brunt of explanations or “othering,” by sharing resources—like local museums or student-authored sites such as IndyKids—where we could find out more on the topic when we were ready.¹⁶

5. It's not a happy ending (because it's never done), but it's not all trauma, either

The phrase “racial literacy book club” may not ring like “after school pizza party”—nor should it. But it doesn't mean this space is without joy or narratives of resistance and agency. These elements must exist alongside the fact that racism is not in the past.

To reflect this, we chose a book that didn't have a Disney-esque ending and delivered complex truths, forgoing neatly wrapped solutions. As a high school teacher and later graduate student, I remember my world shifting when I realized the "victory" of *Brown vs. Board* was laden with interest convergence, or that respectability politics buried the history of a young Claudette Colvin staying in her bus seat long before Rosa Parks.¹⁷ The edited history we've all been taught in texts is often storyboarded for a pleasing arc like sitcoms. Simply put, what we've learned is not the whole story. Getting that story takes years of careful, uncomfortable listening and learning, and even then we only grasp vital fragments. I would share this with students, and reiterate how very few of the issues we discussed had been "figured out." The case was the same for people: we were planting seeds of social change that took time to sprout. I couldn't expect fruit for the picking at year's end, but I did look for and celebrate the small steps I saw students make.

Speaking of celebrating, it was immensely important to find joy. Stories of people of color, in fiction and non-fiction worlds, in pre-K to college level texts, are too often about trauma alone. Racial oppression does cause trauma—but there is so much more to BIPOC stories than violence and persecution. If those themes alone are the stories we consistently share as educators, then we risk students associating entire groups of people as

synonymous with struggle. There are enormous reservoirs of joy, resistance, agency, innovation, creativity, passion and *fun* in literature around BIPOC lives. These life-affirming legacies must be explored and discussed. The main character of Angie Thomas's book suffers deeply. Our group saw her grapple with code switching, PTSD, protests, and more. But we also saw her flirt, love her parents, confide in friends, and just be a teenager. As much as our space needed to greet difficult subjects head on, we shed light on the joy, inspiration and everyday life in these stories about race, too.

Our club had roughly 40 minutes together each week, which in a perfect-weather, no-field-trip-conflict, short-lunch-line school year, meant we spent around 800 minutes together. An impressive number, but an infinitesimal amount of time to talk about and understand racism. No number of minutes would ever be enough. I had to remind myself and my students: racism wasn't something we'd read about on a Wednesday, figure out on a Thursday, and exterminate on a Friday. We talked about how the work is never done—no one ever "arrives."¹⁸ None of us had "arrived" when the club wrapped up each May. We challenged each other to sit with that uncomfortable truth, knowing that we each still had much work to do. Racial literacy book clubs have to be active spaces, with sustained praxis that doesn't fade away.¹⁹ At the club's end, we'd ask each other: how will we continue to do this work now that the club is over? How will

Questions for the Educator/Moderator

- Who are my students? Why did they decide to be here?
- How am I always putting their humanity first?
- What support do I need, and from whom, to host this club successfully?
- What efforts am I taking to make sure students of color don't carry additional burdens in this space?
- What did I wish I had a chance to engage in around racism when I was in middle school?
- How am I mining my own racial positionality?
- How am I centering voices of BIPOC, AAPI, Latinx and other racial groups both in our chosen text and greater discussions?
- How am I reinforcing community norms and modeling "I" statements?
- How are my students feeling and how can I keep checking in to find out?
- How am I making space for JOY?

we keep each other accountable with love and solidarity once next year starts? How will we show up as antiracist outside of this book club? I know I'll still be thinking about my answers this August when our book club begins again. 🌍

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JOANNA BATT is a former U.S. History teacher, and current PhD candidate and Donald D. Harrington Fellow at UT Austin's College of Education in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction. Informed and inspired by her time as a high school teacher in Buffalo, N.Y., Joanna is deeply passionate about the relationship of social studies teaching and social justice. She studies history education with an emphasis on race, gender, and sexuality, researching how critical history teaching and multimodal curricula centered in students' lives can support educational equity and student agency. She also moderates a racial literacy book club for middle schoolers.

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