

Frederick Douglass and Today's College Classroom

By Mark Higbee

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This essay derives from my belief that our students should read *The Narrative of Frederick Douglass*.

I have assigned Douglass to classes at three non-elite public universities, in such courses as the first half of the U.S. history survey, world history since 1500, and Afro-American history. At my current institution, Eastern Michigan University, over 400 students in my African-American history course have been assigned the book, and nearly all of them wrote a paper on Douglass.

First published in 1845, *The Narrative of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself*, quickly became a bestseller in the

antebellum North and in the United Kingdom.

By dramatizing the inhumanity of slavery and winning converts to the Abolitionist movement, the *Narrative* helped make American history in the years before the Civil War, just as, in the last few decades, the book has helped teach American history.

The *Narrative* went out of print in the 1850s and was not republished until 1960, but, in the last 40 years, numerous editions selling hundreds of thousands, if not millions of copies, have appeared.¹

This is a powerful piece of literature and a priceless history lesson. As W.E.B. Du Bois once observed, "No one can read that first thin autobiography of Frederick Douglass and have left many illusions about slavery."²

Douglass, the child of a white father and a slave woman, was born into slavery on Maryland's Eastern Shore in 1818. He escaped to the North in 1838, at the age of

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With the success of the Narrative, Douglass rapidly became a major figure in abolitionism.

20, using his most prized possession—his own literacy, a rarity among slaves—to forge papers that he used in his escape.

Within three years after arriving in the North, Douglass had become an important abolitionist orator. He spent the early 1840s traveling across Northern states, lecturing against slavery and describing his own experiences as a slave, to galvanize support for the two principle demands of the abolitionists: an immediate, uncompensated abolition of slavery and full and complete equality for Black people.

These radical demands were unpopular with most Northerners, but the persistence with which the abolitionists pushed them helped immeasurably to bring on the Civil War and abolition.

In 1845, at age 27, Douglass published his *Narrative* to great popular acclaim. With the success of the *Narrative* and his impressive skills as an orator, Douglass rapidly became a major figure in abolitionism.

But within a decade Douglass and the movement's main leader, William Lloyd Garrison, came into open conflict over movement strategy. Garrison and other leading white abolitionists opposed Douglass when, in 1847, he founded his own abolitionist newspaper, *The*

North Star.

This conflict between Douglass and the Garrisonians arose both because Garrison was jealous of rivals within the movement and, most importantly, because of real political differences. Douglass had concluded that some Garrisonian principles hindered the movement's effectiveness and thus prolonged the agonies of slavery.

To Douglass, Garrison's anti-slavery disunionism—the idea that the United States, as a nation founded on slavery, should be broken up, a very unpopular notion even among people otherwise sympathetic to abolitionism—was an obstacle best dropped.

Likewise, Douglass thought that Garrison's open hostility to all established churches and his opposition to all abolitionist participation in electoral politics undercut the movement's strength and effectiveness.³

Douglass, in short, sought a practical and efficacious abolitionist movement and thus rejected the Garrisonian focus on a morally pure movement. But in 1844-45, when he was writing his *Narrative*, Douglass remained a Garrisonian in his politics, and this, along with his broad abolitionist aims, profoundly shaped his *Narrative*.

The *Narrative* effectively motivates students to think seriously about the past and about the

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meaning of historical experience. His moving, accessible language and his veracity as a writer ensure—at least in my experience—that students always respond to his *Narrative* with passion and interest.

The story that Douglass tells is compelling and full of life to student readers, Black and white, Latino and Asian.

As one student wrote,

Douglass's account of his life makes my heart ache. He spoke of how cold he was as a child and how his feet got so cold...[that] they cracked and had gashes in them...This was one of the times among many [reading the book] where I had to stop and take a break because it hurt me so. Only a slave could describe the bitterness, pain, and hurt they as persons would endure... I don't believe a historian could have done it better.

Another student wrote that upon reading how slaves “slept on the cold, damp floor” she “began to try to put myself in the mind frame of a slave, and I was in tears at the thought of living a life so miserably.”

Students who react so powerfully to assigned readings feel the connections between history and their own lives—and they become

better students as a result.

Likewise, a history major wrote that “This book, from a former slave, had more of an impact on me and how I view slavery than any book I have read from a historian.”

And another white male student, a sophomore who told me he had never before been taught anything about slavery, despite having gotten an “A” in his high school advanced placement U.S. history course, wrote in his paper four years ago:

I found myself rooting for Douglass throughout the story. This book made me feel ashamed and embarrassed that my forefathers could have been part of such inhumanity... This book has become such a valuable piece of history because of how revealing it is, and how it documents a very unique individual.

The comment of another student that “the information” she gained by reading Douglass “will remain with me throughout my life and may even help me with some of the most important decisions that I make” is entirely typical of the depth of enthusiasm and importance that many of my students attach to reading the *Narrative*. Clearly, students love the *Narrative of Frederick Douglass* and respond to it on multiple levels.

Many students have confessed that Douglass's Narrative was the first book they had ever read cover to cover.

Further, the *Narrative* works well in classes of students with diverse educational backgrounds and varying academic skills. In my experience, students with poor reading skills are only a little less likely to finish the book and are just as likely to be captivated by Douglass as are students with superior reading skills.

Another plus: the *Narrative* is short—a major virtue in reaching students. Even the best students appreciate a short, brilliantly written book. The full original text of the *Narrative* runs approximately 50,000 words, or around 80 pages in most editions, not counting whatever supplementary materials are included in a given edition.

Consequently, the full text can be readily read by, and be intellectually challenging to, nearly all students. It can also be read, comprehended, and rewarding to many students whose reading skills are not what we would like.

Indeed, many students have confessed that the *Narrative* was the first book they had ever read cover to cover—confessions that are both sad commentaries on the state of reading in American society and testaments to the power of Douglass's writing 150 years after he published the *Narrative*, with its impassioned argument that literacy and freedom are

inextricably linked.

In fact, the single passage from Douglass that my students quote most often is his own quotation of his master saying that:

Learning would spoil the best nigger in the world... It would forever unfit him to be a slave. He would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master.⁴

Another reason the *Narrative* is so valuable pedagogically is that by reading it students with little or no knowledge of the history of American slavery can learn a great deal, and those who already know something about slavery and American history will find new subtleties to ponder.

For example, one of my students, an astute and academically well-prepared student, wrote that Douglass's discussion of "insecurity and isolation" as a slave and as a runaway raised issues this student:

...never considered when being told of slaves escaping to freedom. I had always felt a sigh of relief when hearing these stories, like all was well when freedom was reached, but in actuality, freedom was all that they had. Many slaves were forced to give up any family or friends.

Through Douglass, this student and others like her learn more

The pedagogical virtues of the Narrative are hardly limited to its readable prose and length.

about life in the South and more about 19th century reform movements—and the ugly fact that the antebellum North, like the Old South, was deeply marked by racism.

In short, none of the hundreds of students I've assigned this book to have ever complained that the book is too complex or too simple.

Of course, we cannot select reading assignments merely to please student taste or satisfy their desire for short assignments. Fortunately, the pedagogical virtues of the *Narrative* are hardly limited to its readable prose and length.

Instructors should assign the *Narrative*—and devote class time to discussing it—as much because of its content and its importance as a literary and historical document as for its popularity with students.

The *Narrative* is a premier example of the slave narrative genre, a body of literature that includes over 100 autobiographies written by escaped slaves between the late 18th century and the American Civil War. The slave narratives comprise a vital and unique source for U.S. history. As one Massachusetts clergyman wrote in 1849, “America has the mournful honor of adding a new department to the literature of civilization—the autobiographies of ex-slaves.”⁵

Students find first-person accounts deeply engaging, yet before taking my class few of my students have ever read such sources. No wonder so many students enter their college history classes under protest, believing that history is inherently dull and meaningless.⁶

In a culture where serious engagement with the sources and problems of history is more often trivialized than promoted, we must seize every chance to use first-person, primary source documents to connect our students with the past and its complexities. To convince students that history is meaningful, we must opt for teaching the lively, controversial aspects of the past.

One reason Douglass is well worth student time and our energies is that his words provide the sharpest possible contrast to the boring history textbooks that have dulled so many students' natural interest in history. History is, after all, the study of human experience, and most young people are vitally interested in human experiences.

Furthermore, student intellectual development is dependent upon learning to see how forces and problems created in the past are present in our lives and society today. History must be comprehended if we are to understand our contemporary world. Douglass can

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help students gain that comprehension, as statements by hundreds of my students attest.

Quotes from two students can help illustrate this. One highly motivated student, a white woman from the Detroit suburbs, put it this way:

Slavery [in my] previous history classes was glossed over as being bad but tolerable. After reading Douglass' book, [I saw that] slavery was intolerable and cruel.

A young African American male from an inner-city neighborhood praised the *Narrative* for exposing “the everyday pain, agonies, and suffering slaves had to go through that most history books do not mention.”

Neither of these two students, before taking my class, were particularly interested in history. Both told me that history courses had always seemed painfully dull and distant, but in reading Douglass and comparable sources, they became convinced that history was profoundly important to them personally and to their understanding of the world. Each student worked very hard in the class, wrote excellent papers, and earned high grades—and both became history majors.

Equally important, in reading Douglass, these students were inspired to ask questions and

consider complex problems. Douglass's text does not proscribe set formulas or conclusions about history, leaving that instead to the student and instructor to work out creatively. Thus, the *Narrative* helps students learn to think about history like professional historians.

Yet, using the *Narrative* to teach history to college students, while worthwhile and productive, is also exceedingly complicated. Indeed, the *Narrative's* accessible and passionate prose can induce readers to overlook the book's full complexity.

In one way or another, Douglass touches upon nearly all the overarching problems of U.S. history: race and slavery, democracy and freedom, equality and justice, war and violence, the rights of men and women, labor and the development of a competitive economy, and the ideals of the Founding Fathers.

This is no small accomplishment for any one book—or for any classroom, for that matter. Through Douglass, students can face these broad problems of American history in myriad ways, with each student free to confront these problems in her own fashion.

Further, the *Narrative*, like any autobiography, expresses the subjective views of its author, presented in a fashion meant to foster the

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conclusions that Douglass favored.

Relatively few students see that an autobiographical work can be useful, informative, and valid, and still be something other than a literal retelling of exactly what happened. Most of my students have real difficulty recognizing that the *Narrative*—and all autobiography, indeed all story-telling—is constructed to tell a story that serves specific purposes.

At times, Douglass's first-person voice is more symbolic than literal. Some of what Douglass so vividly portrays as his own experience describes the truth of what was done to many slaves, but not always to Douglass himself, despite the first-person narration.

Yet students tend to assume that to suggest that what the *Narrative* says is less than the literal truth is an attempt to diminish Douglass. In courses on African American history, many students, Black and white, alert to how Black history and heroes have been excluded from their schooling, oppose any possible denigration of a Black hero like Douglass.

In reading the *Narrative*, most of my students, with varying degrees of intensity, become Douglass partisans. Mostly, I applaud this enthusiasm, but this fervor can get in the way of considering such historical issues as regional differences in slavery, or the impact of

plantation versus small-farm agriculture on slave life, or strategic differences among Abolitionists, or variations in slaveholder practice.

Some students have difficulty seeing Douglass's story as a way of understanding not just the struggles of one great person, or even of countless enslaved individuals, but as a way of grasping slavery as a social system at the heart of American history. Likewise, the ambiguities of memory, and the varied, often unrevealed, purposes for which memoirs are created, involve subtle issues of interpretation of evidence that many student readers cannot fully engage.

I repeatedly tell my students that the *Narrative* was written consciously to appeal to Northern sentiments, with the aim of inspiring active opposition to slavery. But this fact strikes many as a minor technical point, one that need not complicate their view of the text: They love the book and feel that they have read The Truth, so why should their teacher harp on contextual details and matters of authorial intention?

On the other hand, many other students do grasp the issue without seeing raising questions as an indictment of Douglass. Douglass skillfully leads his readers to feel his is the story of all American slaves, and he does so in order to

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promote abolition.

Few teachers will object to this moral purpose in the *Narrative*, which contributes mightily to the book's appeal, but I also want students to see that there's more to history than making moral judgments and finding heroes in the past.

All these concerns, and others, are real problems, of course, but pedagogically they are highly productive problems, unlike the problem of students being bored by assigned readings. They involve sophisticated issues of evidence, causation, and historical interpretation—the kinds of issues that engage historians. So even the problems in how my students read Douglass are satisfying problems to grapple with.

In part, the difficulty in getting students to use Douglass as a lens into the political economy of antebellum America arises from most students' unfamiliarity with thinking critically about society as a social-economic system.

But this difficulty also stems from two characteristics of the *Narrative* itself. The first is that Douglass consciously wrote his *Narrative* in terms calculated to inflame the moral passions of Northerners by focusing on the brutalities committed against individual human beings. That approach, while consistent with the Garrisonian poli-

tics of moral suasion, implicitly minimized efforts to see slavery primarily as a social system.

The second relevant characteristic of the *Narrative* pertains to Douglass's problematic but concerted effort to use his own life to represent the African American slaves as a people. Like W.E.B. Du Bois and Malcolm X in their 20th century masterpieces of African American autobiography, Douglass crafted his autobiography so as to seemingly embrace the entire experience of a whole "race" of oppressed people in America, and he used this self-created life story as a club against slavery and racial prejudice.⁷

But, in fact, Douglass's life as a slave was atypical compared to the lives of most American slaves, for a variety of reasons. Most significantly perhaps, Douglass as a young boy grew up in his grandmother's cabin, located miles away from whites and, in the words of Ronald Takaki, "far away psychologically from the reality of slavery."

Long after the Civil War, in 1881, Douglass wrote of his childhood in that cabin that, "with my grandmother, whose kindness and love stood in place of my mother's, it was some time before I knew myself to be a slave... Her little cabin had to me the attractions of a palace."

Takaki argues that these

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relatively sheltered early years let Douglass develop "a sense of selfhood and a consciousness of freedom" that endured long after leaving his isolated cabin.⁸ This kind of early childhood was unknown to most slave children—and the *Narrative* does not note the exceptional nature of his own slave childhood, for this would not have advanced his moral and political goal, the abolition of slavery.

Douglass's atypical experience is further illustrated by his upbringing in Maryland, a Border state that had a very large population of free people of color.

Most slaves lived further South, in states where slavery was a more dominant institution and nearly all African Americans were enslaved. Most American slaves were field hands on large plantations for their entire life, but Douglass first became a field hand at 16 and remained one only three years.

At 19, when his first attempt at escaping was foiled, Douglass, instead of suffering the usual punishment of being "sold South," was returned to the city of Baltimore, where he had lived for seven years previously.

During his first stay in Baltimore, he used the relative freedom of urban slavery to learn to read—an opportunity and an achievement that alone made the young

Douglass rare among slaves. In his second stay in Baltimore, he acquired skill as a ship's caulker and was allowed to hire out his own time, another rare privilege for slaves, one unheard of on plantations.⁹

In short, even before he successfully escaped from slavery at age 20, Douglass had about as much freedom as an American slave could possess. His personal experience of slavery, while entirely authentic, was far removed from the typical slave life.

For example, Douglass's *Narrative* barely mentions the forced break-ups of slave families by slaveowners, whose sales of slave property commonly resulted in life-long family separation. Slave families were destroyed in this fashion with terrible frequency. At least 15 of Douglass's own relatives, including a sister and two aunts, were "sold South" by the time Douglass was 14, and an estimated two million slave family separations occurred in the antebellum South.¹⁰

Why Douglass said so little about family break-ups in the *Narrative* is unclear, but to have highlighted this issue would have necessitated admitting that the oppressed slaves were not as devoid of love of family or as stripped of human feelings as abolitionists often claimed.

Needless to say, Douglass did

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not admit in his *Narrative* or his oratory than his experiences were atypical, for his credibility as a foe of slavery derived from his ability to give direct testimony on the horrors of slavery, from his ability to present himself as representative of every slave.

Hence the sources of the *Narrative's* political utility in the 1840s parallels its pedagogical appeal today: powerful firsthand testimony. But at times that testimony was imagined rather than literal, and its emotional power can induce some students to resist evaluating the *Narrative* critically. Yet the *Narrative* encourages those students to look critically at the broader issues of U.S. history.

Similarly, many students tend to take Douglass too literally when he asserts that the slaves were so totally demoralized and degraded by enslavement that they were left psychologically crippled and incapable of independent thought.

In fact, students are so captivated by Douglass's descriptions of violence against the slaves that they often tend to overlook the clear evidence in the *Narrative* and other assigned readings that slavery—for all its brutality and oppression—neither crippled the slaves' moral and intellectual capacities nor destroyed the African American people.

One of the most distinctive features in all of American history is the tremendous cultural identity and strength that the enslaved African American community created during centuries of bondage, despite the terrible oppressions suffered by Black people.

Without this strong Black culture of resistance, the African American community could not have survived, or had such a profound and lasting impact on all of American culture.

In the classroom, I am always struck by the differences in what white students as a group, and Black students as a group, know and don't know about American history.

For example, usually about half my white students start the semester believing that slavery's worst feature was that the slaves were not paid for their work. In contrast, I've never had a Black student who was unaware that slavery often forcibly broke up slave families and routinely employed the most brutal violence.

But white and Black students alike are impressed by the same themes in the *Narrative*: the value of literacy, the brutal violence used against the slaves, the sexual abuse of enslaved women, and the slaves' desire for freedom.

Students are also united across lines of color by their dismay over

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the material deprivation the slaves faced, which students quite often see in modern terms as a denial of adequate access to consumer products, like a variety and abundance of clothes, as well as beds, blankets, food, even commercial entertainment.

In such ways, students connect features of their own lives, things they cannot imagine doing without, to the hardships Douglass and his people endured.

White student reactions to class discussions of the *Narrative* usually fall into one of two camps. The first—and more common—response of white students is a kind of sympathetic, veils-have-been-lifted-from-my-eyes response.

Many students express a sense of “shame” for being white after reading Douglass, and many more express anger for not having been taught this history before. Nearly all express gratitude for finally learning, from Douglass, about a previously unimagined and brutal aspect of American history.

It is no wonder that many young people become angered when they learn something of the full, complex, and troubled history of this country, but neither anger nor shame is the goal pedagogically.

The second camp of white student reaction to Douglass is the

much smaller, but still important, angry “white pride” defensive reaction to the *Narrative*. Almost every semester some students argue, with varying force, that the historical and contemporary oppression of African Americans has been exaggerated by the media, by Blacks, by Douglass, and by their teacher.

Oddly enough, a recurring claim white students with this point of view make during class discussions of the *Narrative*—a text that stresses both how hard the slaves labored and Douglass’s own deep belief in the moral value of labor—is that Black people are now and probably always have been terribly lazy.

One student wrote:

Too many black people today believe that the world owes them... At what point does it end? Shouldn't everyone try to do the best they can just as Frederick did so they could become better people? No one should remain complacent in their 'lot' in life and if they are we can only conclude they choose to remain that way.

Fortunately, most students do not bring such strongly held racial prejudices to the class. But all our students come from a racially polarized society where racial differences are widely assumed to be real, inborn, and unchanging.

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were not innate realities.***

Consequently, many students are surprised that Douglass says nothing about racial differences being inherent or desirable, but instead focuses on slavery and freedom as two opposing social conditions. To Douglass, slavery and oppression can be abolished, and freedom created, by human action.

For many students, this vision of how to create freedom and equality is deeply inspiring. For others, the defensive white pride minority, it seems threatening.

The *Narrative* implicitly challenges the racial essentialism so common in most American discussions of race and racism today. Douglass was way ahead of his century, and of our own time as well, in his conviction that racial differences were mere artifacts of history and society, not innate realities.

Douglass demonstrates, in powerfully convincing, non-rhetorical words and images, that American society has used racialization as a means of dehumanizing and exploiting people.

For me, teaching Douglass is a way to help bridge the racial barriers of American life today, barriers that are all too present on the college campus. By reading the *Narrative*, white students learn that slavery was much more than a denial of paying jobs for Black people.

As one of my students wrote,

the *Narrative*,

opened my eyes to how naive I was about slavery...I could feel the pain and torture along with Douglass and other slaves...now I can understand more about what the slaves went through.

African American students react with equal enthusiasm. One young man who started the course filled with a passion for, but not much actual knowledge of, his people's history, described his pride in having read Douglass: "In the society I live in today it is very important that I, an African American, acquire as much knowledge as I can."

The study of American slavery is too often a divisive and bitter experience for interracial classrooms. Quite often, classes jump over slavery very quickly, even at the collegiate level.

But, through Douglass, the study of American slavery can become an educational journey that is transformative and unifying—even as his text brings up all the major problems of American life for the students and poses major issues of historical understanding.

Last year one white student ended her paper by describing how "sickened" she was reading the *Narrative*, since Douglass was so frequently "painfully gory when describing events" like the whipping of a slave woman.

"I think more white people should be forced to read books like Douglass' and maybe there will be more tolerance in this country," this student concluded.

Differing a bit with my student,

I would say that more students of all colors should read *The Narrative of Frederick Douglass*, for as another student in the same class wrote, Douglass "opens your eyes to a world we never saw." ■

Note

Citations to Douglass's *Narrative* appear in the text as "*Narrative*" and refer to the edition edited by David Blight. But when references are made to words written by Blight that appear in his edition of the *Narrative*, Blight is cited in the text.

All quotations from students are

from papers written by the author's students. Copies of these papers, or quotations from them, are in the author's possession.

The author thanks his Eastern Michigan University students, and Deborah DeZure and David Blight for their comments on early versions of this essay.

Endnotes

¹ Blight, 15-18.

² Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 715.

³ Takaki shows that Douglass had also come to oppose Garrisonian pacifism, and this "was one of the key reasons" for his break with Garrison. Years later Douglass wrote that "A man without force is without the essential dignity of humanity," but that argument was already apparent in the *Narrative's* account of Douglass's epic battle with Covey. Takaki, pages 22-4. When I make distinctions between the Garrisonian and anti-Garrisonian abolitionism, few students seem captivated. My own explication of the political beliefs and strategies are not as memorable or awe-inspiring, let alone as interesting to talk about, as Douglass's words. Yet because the *Narrative* is strongly shaped by the Garrisonian politics its author held to in 1845 but was soon thereafter to reject, here is an instance where the *Narrative's* power lends itself toward slighting a vital chapter in Douglass's life and in the history of the nation.

⁴ *Narrative*, p. 57. Over the years, at least

a hundred of my students have quoted from this passage in their papers, without my having called it to their attention.

⁵ Peabody

⁶ Loewen, pages 1-2, 313, cites several studies that demonstrate how unpopular history courses are with high school students. For the most part, I agree with Loewen's broad argument, although I think his title is especially regrettable, since it blames teachers for problems that his book shows stem from textbooks and their authors and publishers, not with classroom teachers.

⁷ W.E.B. Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn*, and Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, written with Alex Haley (1965). Douglass, Du Bois, and Malcolm all depicted their life experiences as central to the experience of the African American people in speeches as well as in their autobiographical writings.

⁸ Takaki, pages 20-21; Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, page 30.

⁹ *Narrative*, pages 59, 67, 90-91, 96.

¹⁰ Blight, page 111, note 9.

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