

Finding Historical Evidence: David Brion Davis

OVERVIEW AND BACKGROUND TO LESSON

This lesson puts equal emphasis on the history of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade and on the craft of forming historical arguments. Students are asked to read recent work from a leading historian of slavery. The author clearly presents a slave trade set against different and competing economies, nations, technologies, but it draws on little primary source material, opening the door for students to locate opportunities to plug in original research they can do with the database. Then the class is prepared to have a productive discussion about what kinds of claims are harder to defend than others and why some types of evidence are more convincing than others.

OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- Use inductive reasoning to evaluate historical arguments
- Draw conclusions about the strength of different types of historical evidence
- Develop a deeper understanding of the slave trade as terrain contested by diverse groups within the populations of Africa, Europe, and the Americans with different outcomes in different regions and at different times

SUGGESTED GRADE AND COURSE

11-12th grade

AP World History; African Studies; African-American Studies

STANDARDS

U.S. History (Grade 5-12): Era 1, Standards 1 & 2

World History (Grades 5-12): Era 6, Standard 1A, 1B, 2A, 4A, 4B, 4C, 6

Social Studies: I, II, III, V, VI, VII, IX

Geography: 1-6, 9-13, 17

RESOURCES/MATERIALS

Davis, David Brion. *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006. 103-123.

Students will use the database directly, either in class or outside of class in the library, computer lab, or at home (if these are options). They will use the “Search the database” page exclusively, and rely heavily on date, flag, itinerary, and outcome queries.

ACTIVITIES/PROCEDURES

1. Assign students chapter 5, “The Atlantic Slave System: Brazil and the Caribbean,” from David Brion Davis’s *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* (Oxford University Press, 2006). Tell them to pay close attention to his overview of the chronology and fluctuation in strength of the colonial presence in the western hemisphere (pp. 109-116, 119-121).
2. Have them either independently (as homework or in class) take notes on the changes in the slave trade. Alternately (or in addition) the class could make a timeline charting the fluctuations of colonial involvement in the slave trade.
3. Divide the class into pairs and tell them to design questions to test Davis’s narrative. For instance, Davis writes on page 103, “In the mid-to-late 1500s the Portuguese gradually transferred the system of sugar plantations worked by slaves from their Atlantic islands such as Madeira, São Tomé, and Príncipe to northeastern Brazil.” Students might phrase a correlated question, “Do fewer Portuguese slave ships land in those islands ports and more arrive in Brazil in 1600 than in 1550?”
4. Have the students look at search options on the database and design search queries based on the questions they came up with.
5. As the student conduct these searches, they should record their findings in journals, noting not only where the search results correspond to or contradict Davis’s story, but also the different types of search queries they used to investigate each claim Davis makes, and places where they had difficulty deciding on an effective search.

Wrap-Up/Assignment

Ask students to put together posters that support, qualify, or challenge what the historian presented in the chapter. After a presentation of these posters, have the class discuss the activity, using the questions below as a guide.

Follow-up assignments could include:

- A two-page response paper building on the discussion in class, requiring students to offer an argument explaining why some claims were easier to back up than others. They are to support their argument with analysis of the reading and evidence from the database.
- In small groups, students rewrite passages of the chapter, incorporating supporting data where applicable, modifying claims Davis makes so that they can be supported by the numbers the students’ searches came up with, and removing those claims for which they cannot find evidence.
- Emails to Professor Davis (david.b.davis@yale.edu) in which students share their findings, ask questions about the trans-Atlantic slave trade, and offer their thoughts on the process of creating narratives supported by quantitative evidence.

ASSESSMENT/EVALUATION

The depth of student understanding can be seen both in their success or struggles crafting questions about the chapter's narrative, in their contributions to the follow-up discussion, and in the content of the follow-up assignment(s).

VOCABULARY

Privateer — a ship privately owned and crewed but authorized by a government during wartime to attack and capture enemy vessels.

Engenhos — Brazilian sugar plantations

Baronetcy — a British hereditary rank of honor reserved for commoners, ranking immediately below the barons and above all orders of knighthood except the Garter.

Demographic historian — one who studies the history of the characteristics of human populations, such as size, growth, density, distribution, and vital statistics.

(Source: The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language: Fourth Edition. 2000)

FURTHER READINGS & DISCUSSION

Herbert S. Klein, *The Atlantic Slave Trade* (Cambridge University Press, 1999)

Johannes M. Postma, *The Atlantic Slave Trade* (Greenwood, 2003)

Captive Passage: The Transatlantic Slave Trade and the Making of the Americas (Smithsonian Institution Press, 2002)

James Pope-Hennessy, *Sins of the Fathers: The Atlantic Slave Traders, 1441-1807* (Castle Books, 2004)

What patterns show up in the stories of colonial involvement in the slave trade? What are the common causes of increases and decreases in colonial power during this era?

Which of Davis's claims were easiest to support with evidence from the database? Which were most difficult? How do you explain these differences? What sort of evidence would we need to find to support the claims we could not support with the database? Which of the arguments are most interesting? What kinds of evidence are most interesting?