

Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois Lesson Plan

Central Historical Question:

How did the philosophies of Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois compare?

Materials:

- Washington and Du Bois PowerPoint
- Copies of Documents A & B
- Copies of Guiding Questions
- PBS video clip on Washington and Du Bois:
[https://ca.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/bf10.socst.us.indust.bookert/booker-t-washington-and-web-du-bois-the-conflict/ - .XQKLoNNKgcg](https://ca.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/bf10.socst.us.indust.bookert/booker-t-washington-and-web-du-bois-the-conflict/-XQKLoNNKgcg)
- Audio recording of Booker T. Washington's "Atlanta Compromise" Speech (optional): <https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/civil-rights-act/multimedia/booker-t-washington.html>

Prior to this lesson, students should be familiar with the historical context of Reconstruction and its aftermath. This lesson is designed for students to engage their knowledge of African American history of the era.

Plan of Instruction:

- I. Warm up. Prior to this lesson, students should have learned about Reconstruction and the rise of Jim Crow in the years after it ended. You may want to activate students' prior knowledge by asking them to write a brief response to the following question: What was life like for African Americans in the South after Reconstruction?

Discuss student answers. Be sure to address any key content that students miss in their responses, including:
 - A. *During Reconstruction (1865-1877), African Americans experienced many legal advances under the protection of the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments and the Civil Rights Act of 1866. African Americans were allowed to vote, hold public office, and own property.*
 - B. *After Reconstruction, many of the legal gains made by African Americans during Reconstruction eroded. Laws were put in place to prevent African Americans from voting (e.g. poll taxes and literacy tests), moving freely, intermarrying with whites, and conducting business. The laws also were designed to keep African Americans working under white people. African Americans who were not employed by a white boss were liable to be charged with "vagrancy" and imprisoned, fined, or subjected to forced labor.*
 - C. *Many state and local governments in the South passed laws enforcing strict racial segregation. In 1896, the Supreme Court upheld the "separate but*

equal” doctrine in Plessy v. Ferguson, providing legal justification for segregation and Jim Crow laws.

- D. *Although states in the North did not enact Jim Crow laws on a similar scale, racial segregation was enforced in some northern schools and intermarrying with whites was illegal in many places. African Americans living in the North also faced the specter of racial violence and were widely denied equal access to employment, housing, and education.*
 - E. *Starting in the Reconstruction era, lynching became a widespread form of terrorism against African Americans, especially against those who had gained an economic or social foothold.*
 - F. *Many African Americans became sharecroppers. Sharecropping contracts favored white landowners, often leaving sharecroppers in a cycle of debt they were powerless to overcome.*
- II. Use the PowerPoint and brief video to introduce Washington and Du Bois and the Central Historical Question.
- A. Slide 2: Booker T. Washington. *Booker T. Washington was born into slavery in Virginia and was nine years old when the Civil War ended. In 1875, he graduated from the Hampton Institute, a school established after the Civil War by Samuel Chapman Armstrong, a former officer in the Union Army. The school focused on teaching vocational skills and providing “moral” instruction to students who were formerly enslaved. Washington was a highly successful student at Hampton, and in 1881, he founded the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama to provide industrial and academic training for African Americans. Washington believed that industrial education, which focused on vocational training, would provide a way for African Americans to build social status and economic self-sufficiency. Tuskegee trained both men and women under Washington’s leadership, but the curriculum varied based on gender. Training for women focused disproportionately on historically female occupations like cooking, nursing, and sewing, while men tended to learn occupations like carpentry, shoemaking, and farming. Washington was not a strong advocate for women’s rights, and he opposed women’s suffrage.*

Washington was a skillful politician and public speaker. He used these abilities to win the support of politicians and philanthropists in the North and South, who donated money to the school. Under Washington’s leadership, the school grew quickly and became a highly influential institution in the region.
 - B. Slide 3: W.E.B. Du Bois. *W.E.B. Du Bois was raised in a free, land-owning family in Massachusetts and attended integrated public schools. Du Bois was a talented student and became the first African American to earn a PhD from*

Harvard University. Like Washington, Du Bois saw education as essential for black advancement, but he had a different educational philosophy than Washington. Du Bois was not opposed to vocational education for some black students, but he believed that African Americans should also have access to a classical education, which focused on academic subjects typically studied in the top schools and universities at the time, like math, history, Latin, and Greek. In particular, Du Bois believed that the most talented African American students and leaders—an elite group he called the “talented tenth”—should receive a classical education, which he believed would help to establish a class of elite leaders that would promote the rights and interests of all African Americans. Du Bois was an advocate for women’s rights and favored women’s suffrage, but he was not clear about what role women would play in his vision of the “talented tenth”. Some have speculated that Du Bois envisioned an unequal role for women, with men assuming most leadership positions, while others have emphasized the strength of his support for women’s equality given the historical context.

- C. Slide 4: Link to video clip. *The following video, which originally aired on PBS, provides a little more information on these two leaders’ story and explains their differences. Play the video clip from *The Rise and Fall of Jim Crow*: <https://www.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/bf10.socst.us.indust.bookert/book-er-t-washington-and-web-du-bois-the-conflict/-XqDVV9NKjCR>*

Note: The video contains a photograph of a lynching. Please review the video before class to determine if it is appropriate for your students.

- D. Slide 5: Central Historical Question. *Today we are going to read a couple of the most influential works by these two highly influential leaders and answer the question: How did the philosophies of Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois compare?*

- III. Document A. Have students read Document A and answer the relevant Guiding Questions in small groups.
- IV. Discussion. Review student responses to the Guiding Questions, supporting their understanding of the passages from Washington’s speech.

Notes on some of the more challenging questions:

- A. For Question 4, students might focus on either of the following passages:
1. Lines 24-26: “In all things that are purely social we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress.” Students should understand that he is supporting, or at least, not opposing, segregation.

2. Lines 27-30: “The wisest among my race understand that the agitation of questions of social equality is the extremest folly, and that progress in the enjoyment of all the privileges that will come to us must be the result of severe and constant struggle rather than of artificial forcing.” Here, Washington is reassuring a white audience that full social equality is not the short-term goal.
- B. For question 5, students can focus on a variety of passages. Here are some examples:
1. Lines 12-13: Washington chose a deferential tone when he says “were I permitted”: “To those of the white race who look to immigrants for the prosperity of the South, were I permitted I would repeat what I say to my own race, “Cast down your bucket where you are.”
 2. Washington chose to reassure his audience that African Americans would not forcefully push for equality under his vision. Examples include:
 - a) Lines 10-11: “It is at the bottom of life we must begin, and not at the top. Nor should we permit our grievances to overshadow our opportunities.”
 - b) Lines 27-28: “The wisest among my race understand that the agitation of questions of social equality is the extremest folly.”
 - c) Lines 31-32: “It is important and right that all privileges of the law be ours, but it is vastly more important that we be prepared for the exercise of these privileges.”
- C. For Question 6, students should understand that we cannot draw definitive conclusions about Washington’s motivations from the evidence provided here, but they can use their understanding of the context of extreme racial inequality in Jim Crow America to reason about what his motivations might have been.
1. Washington lived in the South and knew the brutality of slavery and Jim Crow firsthand. Given the extreme violence facing African Americans in the South at the time, Washington may have thought that striking a bargain with white Southerners (acquiescence on inequality in exchange for white people’s support for increased economic opportunities for African Americans) was the most effective way to improve the lives of African Americans in the short term.
 2. Some students might speculate that Washington was being opportunistic. That by appeasing white leaders, he was creating a position of power and influence for himself regardless of—or perhaps even at the expense of—what was best for African Americans.
- D. For Question 7, students should understand that Washington believed that African Americans should not push forcefully for full social and political equality in the short term. Instead, they should focus on building economic

power by gaining skills in the trades. This economic power would provide a platform for the expansion of social and political rights in the future.

Note: As an option, after discussing student answers, you can play an audio recording of Washington reading an excerpt of the speech. This recording was made in 1908, 13 years after the speech was originally delivered.

<https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/civil-rights-act/multimedia/booker-t-washington.html>

- V. Document B. Have students read Document B and answer the Guiding Questions in small groups.
- VI. Discussion. Discuss students' responses to the Guiding Questions for Document B.

Notes on some of the more challenging questions:

- A. For Question 3, students should recall that Du Bois grew up in a middle-class family in Massachusetts and had been very successful in his pursuit of a classical higher education at one of the nation's most elite universities. Although we don't have direct evidence of how his background may have influenced his perspective on Washington's philosophy, students should see that the dramatic differences in the two leaders' backgrounds may have affected their philosophies.
- B. For Question 4, students may focus on several passages. Du Bois's advocacy for higher education for those he considered to be the most talented African American scholars is evident in the following lines:
1. Lines 7: "The steady withdrawal of aid from institutions for the higher training of the Negro."
 2. Lines 9-12: "Is it possible that [African Americans] can make economic progress if they are deprived of political rights and allowed only the most meager chance for developing their exceptional men?"
 3. Lines 14-15: "opposes the higher training and ambition of our brighter minds, we must firmly oppose them."
- C. Questions 5-6 ask students to speculate about possible reasons why Du Bois expressed different sentiments in his letter than he did in his book. Although we can't know Du Bois's motivations with certainty, reasoning about possible motivations is a useful exercise in historical contextualization. Some possibilities that students might posit are:
1. Du Bois was being polite in his personal correspondence but felt the need to be more honest in his book.
 2. Du Bois was being deferential to the most powerful civil rights leader when he wrote the letter because he saw value in maintaining a good relationship

- with him. Over the years, Du Bois had entertained job offers from Washington and had asked Washington to serve as a reference for jobs.
3. Du Bois's ideas may have changed in the eight years between writing the letter and the book, perhaps because he perceived that Washington's strategy was not working at improving the lives of African Americans or perhaps because he was exposed to new political ideas.
 4. Du Bois may have seen an opportunity to make a name for himself by critiquing Washington, who was the most influential civil rights leader at the time, when he wrote his book.
- VII. Final Discussion. Wrap up the lesson with a big-picture evaluation of the two leaders' philosophies.
- A. Whose approach to education was better for the time? Washington's idea of providing industrial education for economic self-sufficiency? Or Du Bois's idea of investing resources in higher education for the "talented tenth"? Are either of these ideas relevant to education today?
 - B. Whose philosophy do you think was better for the advancement of African Americans at the time? Why? Is the debate between Washington and Du Bois relevant for civil rights issues today? If so, how? If not, then why?

Citations:

Document A

Washington, Booker T. "Atlanta Exposition Speech." Speech, Atlanta, GA, September 1895. https://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=ody_mssmisc&fileName=ody/ody0605/ody0605page.db&recNum=0.

Washington, Booker T. "'Atlanta Compromise' Speech." December 5, 1908. Sound recording, 03:29. <https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/civil-rights-act/multimedia/booker-t-washington.html>.

Document B

Du Bois, W. E. B. "Of Mr. Booker T Washington and Others." Chapter 3 in *The Souls of Black Folk*. Chicago: A.C. McGlurg & Co., 1903.

<https://catalog.loc.gov/vwebv/search?searchCode=LCCN&searchArg=03011173&searchType=1&permalink=y>

<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=hvd.32044010329985&view=1up&seq=58>

Du Bois, W.E.B. *W.E.B. Du Bois to Booker T. Washington congratulating Washington on his "Atlanta Exposition Speech," September 24, 1895*. Autograph letter. Library of Congress. *Booker T. Washington Papers*.

<http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/naacp/prelude.html - obj2>

This lesson was originally developed by the Stanford History Education Group.