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De-constructing Stereotypes in Undergraduate-Level African History and Geography Courses

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De-constructing Stereotypes in Undergraduate-Level African History and Geography Courses

Summary

Teaching Sub-Saharan African history and geography courses in the Western parts of the world can be challenging since the media often equip students with the idea that the continent is broken and helpless (Mason, 2012). Course content has the potential to change stereotypical perceptions of Africa by portraying the continent's achievements in culture, economy, health, and politics. If not well facilitated, students may complete courses without shifting perspectives; for that reason, this workshop will prepare potential instructors with strategies to support students in learning a balanced view of Africa. Using insights from Davis (2004) and Gugler (2010), potential instructors in this workshop will learn how to contextualize Africa within a larger world history, critically debate relevant topics, and identify films that possess contextual and historical situations to deconstruct African stereotypes.

Keywords

Sub-Saharan Africa, deconstructing stereotypes, geography, history

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De-constructing Stereotypes in Undergraduate-Level African History and Geography Courses

Faith Nankasa Mambulu

SUMMARY

Teaching Sub-Saharan African history and geography courses in the Western parts of the world can be challenging since the media often equip students with the idea that the continent is broken and helpless (Mason, 2012). Course content has the potential to change stereotypical perceptions of Africa by portraying the continent's achievements in culture, economy, health, and politics. If not well facilitated, students may complete courses without shifting perspectives; for that reason, this workshop will prepare potential instructors with strategies to support students in learning a balanced view of Africa. Using insights from Davis (2004) and Gugler (2010), potential instructors in this workshop will learn how to contextualize Africa within a larger world history, critically debate relevant topics, and identify films that possess contextual and historical situations to deconstruct African stereotypes.

KEYWORDS: Sub-Saharan Africa, deconstructing stereotypes, geography, history

LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of this workshop, participants will be able to:

- identify stereotypes in existing African history or geography course content;
- incorporate balanced perspectives into revised African history or geography courses; and
- develop strategies using films to address African stereotypes in their teaching.

REFERENCE SUMMARIES

Mason, J.E. (2012). A brief history of Africa stereotypes, part 1: broken, helpless Africa.

John Edwin Mason: Documentary, Motor Sports, Photo History. Retrieved from http://johnedwinmason.typepad.com/john_edwin_mason_photogra/2012/03/african-stereotypes-part-1.html.

This author is concerned that instructors spend more time “un-teaching” inaccurate notions about Africa, rather than teaching African history. Modern cinema (e.g., *The Lion King*, 1994) and media portrayals of poverty reflect a biased version of Africa that prevent students from appreciating coexisting political, economic, and religious achievements, despite an eagerness to learn. Mason indicates that the individuals consuming this imagery should be more critical. “*Viewers -- that means all of us -- have a responsibility to be aware of the visual culture in which we live and to understand how images can reveal truths and still tell lie.*” He argues that Africa is not a single entity but a continent with more than fifty

countries; it is not just a holiday destination to see wild animals or witness the violent history of the slave trade. This reading will enable seminar facilitators to share Mason's experiences and offer critical solutions for stereotyping in history or geography courses. Participants in the workshop will examine preconceived ideas about Africa, identify the misconceptions students may have gathered from informal sources, and work towards developing courses that help students explore African culture, history, and geography more critically.

Pahl, R.H. (1995). The image of Africa in our classrooms. *The Social Studies*, 86(6), 245-247.

In this article, Pahl compares negative and positive imagery presented by the media and identifies the need to represent Africa correctly in the classroom:

"A major multicultural dimension that needs to be addressed in our classrooms is the image [mostly negative events coloured with 19th century and colonial bias] the continent of Africa receives in the news media. These largely negative images are in sharp contrast to peaceful rural [and urban] images, central issues of human beings of all color and their attempt to build [as well as already built] stable societies" (245).

Pahl suggests that the study of Africa should include untold stories in order to negate dominant imagery in Western culture (e.g., sources of wealth and cultural contributions, or the negative impacts of the West on African society). This reading demonstrates the positive dimensions of historical topics, which participants can use in their classrooms to expose undergraduate students to contexts beyond media reports.

Davis, R.H. (2004). Teaching about African past in the context of world history. *World History Connected*, 2(1). Retrieved from <http://worldhistoryconnected.press.illinois.edu/2.1/davis.html>.

In this article, the author proposes a shift in teaching African history from the perspective of a "glorious African past" to that of an "intercommunicating world". He argues that the first approach, which concentrates on ancient empires, civilization of Egypt, and military leadership, fuels African stereotypes because it does not provide true insight into the contributions of African history to world history. The "intercommunicating world" perspective identifies the relationships between the Eastern and Western hemispheres and Oceania, as a way to reveal regional significance in world history.

Davis proposes exploring the geography of Africa with regards to the pre-industrial era and its influence on the nature and progress of expansion within Africa. In order to

deconstruct stereotypes, he proposes the rest of African history be taught in relation to these origins and the following worlds: classical or ancient, post classical, Atlantic, colonial and the contemporary globalized. This article lays a path by which participants of this workshop can begin teaching African history or geography topics in connection to world histories.

Gugler, J. (2010). African films in the classroom. *African Studies Review*, 53(3), 1-17.

Gugler argues that films have the potential to introduce Western society to the African continent and its people by engaging them in African experiences. Historical films are capable of eliciting emotions that can facilitate learning and address stereotypes:

"[I]ntimate portraits of people who belong to another culture, who have experienced a different history, and who live in quite different economic and political circumstances today, are particularly important with audiences that start out with negative views of the 'Other'" (2).

Despite the relevance of such films, funny scenes and other fictions may be misleading to students, thereby fueling rather than deconstructing African stereotypes. Gugler suggests that instructors should critically examine the relevance of the films they intend to use to ensure that context and events portrayed in the film are not significantly different from reality.

This reading will help seminar facilitators demonstrate how films can describe complex regional lives and cultures, and complement literature on African history in terms of place, space, and people. Films are crucial to creating an appreciation for the African way of life and to viewing African history as part of world history. Workshop participants will learn that films may be used to provide insight into topics such as the environment, political and economic realities, health issues, and urban development.

CONTENT AND ORGANIZATION

Prior to the workshop, ask participants to watch the TED talk, “Chimamanda Adichie: The Danger of a Single Story” (see link in Presentation Strategies). Suggest that they bring a course outline for an African history or geography course (if possible) so that they can start considering revisions during the workshop.

Duration (min)	Subject	Activity	Purpose
10	Introductions	Introduce yourself and give participants an opportunity to introduce themselves and describe their disciplinary/teaching backgrounds.	Participants have a chance to meet one another.
15	Introductory Activity	<p>Create two spaces at the front of the classroom on the board or using chart paper titled: (1) Positive Aspects of African Culture/History and, (2) Negative Aspects of African Culture/History. Provide participants with Post-it Notes and ask them to brainstorm ideas that would fit into each category. Have them write each idea on an individual Post-it Note and then post the Notes in the provided spaces.</p> <p>Once everyone has posted their responses, spend some time grouping similar answers and identifying common themes. Likely, the brainstorm will highlight some common negative perceptions of Africa (e.g., poor and violent). Take this opportunity to explain how and why these perceptions can be detrimental to student learning. Be sure to emphasize the topics identified by the participants that could be used to create more balanced course content.</p>	<p>Identify some of the prevalent African stereotypes in university level courses through a non-threatening activity that engages all of the participants.</p> <p>Articulate the outcomes for the workshop.</p>
10	Video and Mini-lecture	Share the YouTube video titled: (My Love & Pride) The Africa they Never Show You (Nyambok, 2009). Minutes	Demonstrate the urgency and relevancy of the workshop outcomes.

		<p>3:00 - 5:00; link provided in the Additional References.</p> <p>Highlight the key ideas from the Mason (2012) and Pahl (1995) references.</p>	
40	Analyzing Current Course Content	<p>Ask participants to share informally any lessons they picked up from watching the assigned pre-workshop TED talk about planning and teaching African history or geography courses.</p> <p>At this point, participants will review the sample course outlines that they brought with them, or use ones provided by the facilitator.</p> <p>Create small groups, and ask each group to identify the following in one (or more) syllabus:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introductory topics • Themes for debate • Assignments <p>Have each group record their findings on the handout provided in Appendix A (one handout per syllabus analyzed). Ask them to discuss and respond to the questions provided in the handout.</p>	Identify and explore ideal university-level course content. Provide participants with concrete ideas for in-class debate activities and assignments.
30	Using Film As A Tool To Deconstruct Stereotypes	<p>Introduce Gugler's (2010) criteria for analyzing how movies represent African culture/history accurately, and how they fuel negative stereotypes.</p> <p>Show the theatrical trailers for the following two films: (1) The Gods Must Be Crazy (1980), and (2) Invictus (2009) (found on YouTube).</p> <p>Facilitate a conversation with participants to answer the following questions:</p>	<p>Examine the benefits and challenges of using movie clips as a teaching tool.</p> <p>Develop strategies for assessing the appropriateness of a given film for use in an African History of Geography course.</p>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What imagery is fictitious, and likely to fuel stereotypes? • What imagery might provide a balanced view of African culture/history? <p>Have participants to turn back to the course outline from the previous activity and consider the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What (if any) university-level course content aligns well with either film, and why? • What other films could be used in a revised version of the course that would aid the instruction of a particular topic? <p>Ask groups to share their thoughts and ideas and create a master list of potential films that could be used to help teach course content.</p>	
15	Action Plan and Conclusion	<p>Re-emphasize the key ideas and strategies covered in the workshop.</p> <p>Challenge participants to start a course design or redesign process as soon as possible after leaving the workshop.</p> <p>Encourage participants to stay in contact with you and each other in order to receive feedback on their future course outlines. Collect the completed handouts at the end of the activity in order to combine the responses from each group. Indicate that you will e-mail the completed document to the participants following the workshop for their future reference. Include the master list of potential film resources.</p>	Motivate participants to implement what they have learned in the workshop into their future courses.
Total Time: 120 minutes			

PRESENTATION STRATEGIES

Ask participants to watch the TED talk, “Chimamanda Adichie: The Danger of a Single Story.” prior to attending the workshop. Adichie warns that synthesising African history into a single story is misleading and results in stereotypes and suggests that courses should pull on material from multiple sources (e.g., books, articles, videos, etc.) in order to crosscheck ideas before they are taught in class. The talk is accessible on YouTube at the following link: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D9lhs241zeg>

Suggest that participants bring a course outline for an African history or geography course to the workshop if they have one. That way, they can start considering revisions to the course during the workshop. Otherwise, facilitators should also search for course outlines online to bring as examples for the workshop. Identify syllabi that balance positive and negative viewpoints through debate, incorporate videos, or use other methods that workshop participants can review, critique and/or adopt. For example, see course outlines on Sub-Saharan Africa linked from the Geography Department’s website at Western University: <http://geography.uwo.ca/undergrad/courses/>.

Facilitators should suggest that prospective instructors consider the economic, urban, health, development, and physical geographies of Africa when framing the themes and content of their African History or Geography courses. Ask instructors to consider adopting the following strategies that promote deconstructing stereotypes in the classroom.

- Conduct preliminary analyses of the reasons undergraduates enroll in a given course and pre-assess ideas about Africa in order to identify pre-existing stereotypes.
- Use physical geography and features to introduce students to different regions and countries. Modify course content to contextualize Africa within rather than apart from world history.
- Use media to explore African history topics and facilitate the deconstruction of stereotypes. For example, ask students to watch and discuss events in films like *Hotel Rwanda* (2004) or *Invictus* (2009).
- Set the scene for economic, urban, health, and development issues by exploring pre- and colonial periods and focusing on two or more countries as case studies. Include positive success stories to balance negative contexts that describe regional struggles or setbacks.
- Introduce a concept, pose a challenging question, or assign a debate that relies on literature for, and against the issue. Example premise for debate provided below:

“African contributions to developing New World agriculture are well recognized.”

Supportive literature:

Heyward, D. C. (1937). *Seed from Madagascar*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.

Contradictory literature:

Carney J. (2003). Agroenvironments and slave strategies in the diffusion of rice culture to the Americas. In K. S. Zimmerer & T. J. Bassett (Eds.), *Political Ecology: An Integrative Approach to Geography and Environment-Development Studies* (pp. 256-273). New York, NY: Guilford Press.

ADDITIONAL REFERENCES

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Mosley, W. G. (2012). *Taking Sides: Clashing Views on African Issues*, 4th edition. Dubuque, IA: McGraw-Hill.

Nyambok, L. (2009). *(My Love & Pride) The Africa They Never Show You*. Retrieved from: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=826tpNNrCF0&feature=kp>.

Stock, R. F. (2013). *Africa South of the Sahara: A Geographical Interpretation*, 3rd edition. New York, NY: Guilford Press.

APPENDIX A: Handout - Worksheet for Analyzing Current Course Content

Course Title: _____

Review the syllabus to identify the following:

- Introductory Topics

- Themes for Debate

- Assignments

Now, answer the following questions:

- What topics are ideal for introducing course content in a balanced way? Why?

- Can these topics be used to deconstruct common stereotypes? How?

- In what ways can the course themes be debated to address stereotypes?

- Describe the assignments that support the deconstruction of stereotypes.

- Can you modify or create a new assignment that would help undergraduate students to gain a more balanced view of African culture/history?