

Towards a More Inclusive History of the Founding: An Inquiry on the Declaration of Independence

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Abstract

There is little question that the Declaration of Independence is a critically important document for students to read and learn from. In it, the Founding Fathers laid the groundwork for creating a new future for the young colonies, a future where “all men are created equal.” Despite the active voices of minoritized groups such as women, African Americans, and indigenous peoples, these voices were silenced in this declaration of freedom. This inquiry explores the silencing as well as the ways in which these groups fought and continue to fight for equality in American society today. Through an exploration of primary, secondary, and tertiary documents, students will learn how minoritized groups have lifted their voices beyond the initial declaration made 245 years ago and how they can be co-conspirators in lifting minoritized voices today.

Introduction

The ways we teach about the Declaration of Independence, like much of United States history, is blanketed in the heritage narrative of the nation’s founding (Loewen, 1995). Within this heritage narrative (Levesque, 2008), the Declaration of Independence is lauded as the document that declared “all men are created equal” within a narrative register that values a strong, unified memory of *The Founding* (VanSledright, 2011); the heritage narrative relies more on collective memory of the large-scale events and eras rather than critiques of historical details (Halbwachs, 1992). As such, students often experience the Declaration of Independence as part of a collective memory rather than as an object of historical examination and critique.

Below is a field-tested inquiry that helps students explore the social context of the Declaration of Independence through the lens of three socio-demographic groups expressly mentioned in the Declaration of Independence: women, enslaved people, and Indigenous peoples. These socio-demographic groups are marginalized in the traditional historical narrative. Through primary and secondary source document analysis, students will address the question, “What impact did omitting women, African Americans, and Indigenous peoples have on their historical struggles for independence?” The inquiry concludes with suggestions for students to take action towards lifting marginalized voices and including marginalized peoples in the dream of equality expressed so clearly in 1776.

Marginalized Voices

Social studies instruction has long been guided by textbook narratives of United States history (Fitzgerald, 2009). Through the textbook, students are exposed to more privileged, white, middle-to-upper class, male, cis-gendered voices and actions than the voices of less-privileged historical counterparts (FitzGerald, 1979; Loewen, 1995;

Wineburg, 2001). When historical figures from marginalized groups (e.g., Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Rosa Parks, Sacagawea, Vincent Chin, Cesar Chavez, Harvey Milk, etc.) are woven into the narrative, it is with an element of tokenism (FitzGerald, 1979). Historical figures from marginalized groups are brought into the historical narrative to exemplify the ways that the country is great and inclusive, while ignoring the struggles that deselect other marginalized individuals from full inclusion in the narrative (Banks & Banks, 2010).

Such marginalization also plays a role in how the public remembers history and how the public deals with challenges to “the narrative” as new historical evidence and argument is brought forth. For example, James Loewen (1995) relates a story of a history teacher who had discussed presidents and the issue of slavery with her students in a sixth grade history class. Loewen writes,

in 2003 an Illinois teacher told her sixth graders that most presidents before Lincoln were slave owners. Her students were outraged -- not with the presidents, but with her, for lying to them. “That’s not true,” they protested, “or it would be in the textbook!” They pointed out that their textbook devoted many pages to Washington, Jefferson, Madison, Jackson, and other early presidents, pages that said not one word about their owning slaves (p. 146).

It is noteworthy that the students were not angry at the former presidents for owning slaves but at the teacher for exposing what the textbook failed to mention. An effect of positive, uncomplicated, privilege-class dominated textbook narrative is the wholesale buy-in that people give to the heroes of the national history. Textbooks are the largest purveyor of this heritage narrative (FitzGerald, 1979).

As of the writing of this piece, the United States of America is witnessing an anger similar to that of the students above to challenges brought against “the narrative.” The widespread conservative backlash to the 1619 Project (Hannah-Jones et al., 2021) has brought about legislation in numerous states, banning participatory civics instruction (Brown, 2021) and social studies instruction that teaches anything but a positive image of the United States and its history (e.g., Ray & Gibbons, 2021). In all such cases, the exclusion of historically marginalized voices dampens the lessons of those who struggled for justice and equality. While others have created interesting Inquiry Design Models (IDMs) related to the Declaration of Independence (e.g., C3 Teachers, n.d.), few focus on the exclusion of marginalized groups. Social studies educators have an important role to play in countering and challenging this heritage narrative and, instead, lifting marginalized voices.

The Socio-Demographic World of the Declaration of Independence

The Declaration of Independence only takes into consideration the rights of white, property-owning men. In 1776, most of the political, social, and economic power was given to people like the Founding Fathers. Less-wealthy male colonists were largely excluded from the spirit, if not from the letter, of the Declaration; they held little wealth, thus little power. While sometimes mentioned, marginalized and enslaved groups (e.g., women, Africans/African Americans/slaves, Native Americans) were not considered as important political actors when the meetings for revolution were taking place. For example,

for America’s black population, freedom didn’t ring in 1776. It would take 87 years and a bloody civil war for most African Americans to gain their “Unalienable Rights” and another 100 years of courageous protests before those rights could be fully exercised. That duality played out across the country, and on Jefferson’s plantations (Bowman, 2016).

Other marginalized groups were intentionally excluded from the Declaration of Independence and would also have to fight for equality, even though their circumstances were different.

Teaching the Declaration of Independence

In the many schools around the United States, the Declaration of Independence is taught as the primary document that officially ended British rule over the thirteen colonies. The Declaration of Independence is taught in connection to the Founding Fathers, who are heroes of the heritage narrative. This contextualization of the Declaration of Independence is so prevalent in social studies classrooms that exemplar lessons about the document continually affirm this stance. For example, the National Endowment for the Humanities provides instructional support for teaching the Declaration of Independence but excludes marginalized voices. This exclusion is illustrated in their lesson objectives:

1. Describe and list the sections of the Declaration of Independence and explain the purpose of each.
2. Give an example of a document that served as a precedent for the Declaration of Independence.
3. Identify and explain one or more of the colonists' complaints included in the Declaration of Independence.
4. Demonstrate an awareness of the Declaration of Independence as a historical process developed in protest of unfair conditions (National Endowment for the Humanities, n.d.).

Within this instructional plan, there are multiple instructional activities and additional resources, including background information important for teachers to know about the Declaration of Independence. There is, however, no mention of how students should consider the colonists and peoples who are not included in the actual document.

Towards a more Inclusive Historical Approach

A more inclusive instructional approach might begin with an exploration of the famous line, "all men are created equal." Hidden within this line is the implicit assertion that white, property (both land and slave) owning men had political power and were seen as equals, excluding those who did not fit that category. As James Loewen (1995) notes, one of the many drawbacks to using textbooks to teach about the Declaration of Independence is the way that they minimize Jefferson's slaveholding and emphasize how common slavery was. By doing so, textbooks use a bit of a bandwagon marketing approach to absolve slave owners of their individual sins.

Certainly, many white Americans in the 1770s were racist. As Loewen (1995) continues, "Race relations were in flux, however, owing to the Revolutionary War and to its underlying ideology about the rights of mankind that Jefferson, among others, did so much to spread" (p.148). While claiming all men are created equal, the Founders (and the heritage narrative) hypocritically excluded women, African Americans, and Native Americans.

Towards an Inquiry Approach

By reading and analyzing primary and secondary sources related to the Declaration of Independence, students are able to incorporate the perspectives of marginalized and enslaved colonial groups.. Although colonists had won the battle for independence, the battle for equality continues today -- more than 245 years since the Declaration of Independence was crafted and sent to King George in Britain.

In the classroom, it is important for teachers to make this continued battle for equality as relevant to students' lives as possible. In discussing how the Declaration of Independence excluded important groups of people, students are able to track the history of power, privilege, and difference from the founding in 1776 to today. Bringing this historical continuity to discussions of the Black Lives Matter, Me Too, and Indigenous Peoples Movements, students are able to trace the echoes and explore the effects of the past in their lived experiences. As a major purpose for social studies is to prepare future citizens (Evans, 2004; National Council for the Social Studies, 2008; Thornton, 2004),

inclusion of all people is critical for the formation of citizens and how they demonstrate citizenship (Collins & Stearns, 2020). Below is the detailed IDM highlighting underrepresented groups.

Inquiry Design Model (IDM) Blueprint™		
Compelling Question	What impact did omitting women, African Americans, and Indigenous peoples have on their historical struggles for independence?	
Standards and Practices	D2.Soc.16.9-12. Interpret the effects of inequality on groups and individuals.	
Staging the Question	The inquiry focuses on highlighting underrepresented groups such as women, African Americans, and Native Americans within the context of the Declaration of Independence. Often, the Declaration of Independence is taught as a document of state political power. Important to the document, however, are the ways in which all colonists' lives were impacted by the declaration. This inquiry explores the impact of independence on marginalized and enslaved groups as well as the agency members of these groups were forced to muster to move towards the ideals of independence.	
Supporting Question 1	Supporting Question 2	Supporting Question 3
If the Declaration of Independence is a break-up letter, why do the colonists want to break-up with the monarchy? Are their reasons justified?	By not being able to participate in the creation of the Declaration of Independence, what did independence mean for marginalized and enslaved groups at the time?	How did marginalized and enslaved groups assert their own needs for independence following the American Revolution?
Formative Performance Task	Formative Performance Task	Formative Performance Task
Students will craft an explanation whether or not the colonists were justified in wanting to break away from England.	Students will describe how women, African Americans, and Native Americans were impacted by the Declaration of Independence.	Students will create a chart, detailing when specific groups (e.g., women, African Americans, and Native Americans) asserted their independence and how.
Featured Sources	Featured Sources	Featured Sources
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Declaration of Independence ● EdSiteMent Declaration of Independence Annotation Sheet 	Capture Sheet Women <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Remember the Ladies, Abigail Adams, 1776 ● Letter: Mary Goddard to George Washington, 1789 African Americans <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● You Can't Tell the Story of 1776 without Talking about Race and Slavery, Time Magazine 	Analysis Chart Women <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Declaration of Sentiments, 1848 ● The Constitutional Status of Women African Americans <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What to the Slave is the

	<p>Native Americans</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Declaration of Independence -- Except for 'Indian Savages', Jawort, 2018 	<p>Fourth of July, Frederick Douglass, 1852</p> <p>Native Americans</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Fight for Freedom and Independence of the First Nations of North America
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Summative Performance Task	Argument	In Langston Hughes' poem Harlem , he asks what happens to a dream deferred. Craft an essay, explaining the ways in which post-Revolution marginalized groups responded to their "deferred dreams." Be sure to begin your essay with a historical explanation of how their dreams were deferred by and in the Declaration of Independence and then explain how each group responded. Conclude with what lessons we can learn from these group's exclusion and proactive responses.
	Extension	Consider who is still left out of existing legislation. What actions are marginalized groups taking today towards full and equal inclusion under the law?
Taking Informed Action	Many groups today still do not have full and equal inclusion under the law. Identify recent news articles that call into question a particular group's equal inclusion in American society and the root causes of such claims. Create a social media post explaining these root causes in order to educate others about such prejudice.	

Using the Sources Per Supporting Question

Below, we detail one way that the resources listed above might be used to support the aims of the inquiry. Suggested learning activities are woven together with the resources as an example of what lesson segments might look like in classroom practice.

Supporting Question 1: If the Declaration of Independence is a break-up letter, why do the colonists want to break-up with the monarchy? Are their reasons justified?

To begin the inquiry, it is important to give the students context about the Declaration of Independence. Teachers should introduce students to the document and ask them to consider the document as a break-up letter. The lesson might begin with a Do Now question, asking students to consider, "Imagine your significant other just broke up with you. How do you feel?" Teachers can then introduce the Declaration of Independence from that perspective, enabling students to explore the perspectives of both the colonists and the monarchy through this lens (see second link in inquiry above).

After the students read the document through the lens of a break-up letter, teachers can ask students to explore the various components of the document, detailing the reasons the colonists want to "break-up" and the reactions the monarchy might have to each of these reasons. This analysis allows students to map the overall content

of the Declaration of Independence through the two explicitly recognized actors: the colonists and the monarchy. Students might then be able to answer an exit ticket question, asking them whether the colonists were justified in wanting to “break-up” with England.

Supporting Question 2: By not being able to participate in the creation of the Declaration of Independence, what did independence mean for marginalized and enslaved groups at the time?

To answer the second supporting question, students must be able to begin the process of considering how women, African Americans, and Native Americans were or were not included in the Declaration of Independence’s major claims. This classroom session might begin with the teacher asking which groups of people seem to be omitted from the major claims of the Declaration of Independence. After identifying women, African Americans, enslaved peoples, and Native Americans as excluded groups, the students can then be placed into groups and tasked with exploring the perspectives of women, of African Americans, and of Native Americans on the concept of *independence*.

Women. For the group exploring the perspective of women in the Declaration of Independence, students might start with a video from CBS News, which discusses Mary Katherine Goddard, a notable woman who was a printer living in Baltimore, Maryland in 1776. In fact, some rare copies of the Declaration of Independence have her name printed at the bottom with her signature, making her story important to the story of the Declaration of Independence (CBS Mornings, 2020). After viewing the video, students might analyze both primary and secondary sources talking about the role of women in the Declaration of Independence and their civic action after the founding of the United States. Additional sources might include the Declaration of Sentiments, Abigail Adams’ “Remember the Ladies,” and a letter that was from Mary Goddard to then General George Washington. Students might also use the secondary source “The Constitutional Status of Women in 1787,” written in 1988 to provide context to the above primary sources.

Free and enslaved African Americans. In the student group exploring African American perspectives, students might be tasked with first watching a video which describes the cruelties of slavery during the time of the American Revolution. After viewing the video, students could begin their analysis of primary and secondary sources, using sources such as a rough draft of the Declaration of Independence that was written by Thomas Jefferson and “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?” by Frederick Douglass. Students might also use the *Time* magazine article “You Can’t Tell the Story of 1776 Without Talking about Race and Slavery” to contextualize their analyses.

Native Americans. The student group focusing on Native Americans might similarly engage sources that document the exclusion of Native Americans. They might begin with an article that discusses how the Declaration of Independence uses the word “savages” and how significant this word was with how Native Americans were treated. Other sources might include excerpts from *The Fight for Freedom and Independence of the First Nations of North America* by Shana Brown and *The American Revolution in Indian Country* by Colin Calloway.

Supporting Question 3: How did marginalized and enslaved groups assert their own needs for independence following the American Revolution?

The third supporting question in this inquiry extends student learning beyond the Declaration of Independence, towards the long, still unrealized struggle for equality. During this third session, students begin considering all the perspectives during the previous class. Using the information they gathered during Supporting Question 2 and new information provided in the Supporting Question 3 resources, students can complete the Analysis Chart provided. By completing this chart, students will have information to answer Supporting Question 3. We have organized material per group so that the structure of the Supporting Question 2 and Supporting Question 3 sessions can be maintained if desired.

Bringing the Class Back Together

After analyzing such sources in groups, students can share their findings with the whole class. As a closure for this session, students should be able to respond to the supporting question, "By not being able to participate in the creation of the Declaration of Independence, what did independence mean for marginalized and enslaved groups at the time?" Students should be able to articulate similarities and differences between the marginalized groups. With additional prompting, students might also be able to consider the ways in which the Founders might have codified the status of these groups and what means each group might have had to further their cause for independence and equality.

Assessing Student Learning

After engaging each of the Supporting Questions, students should have the ability to craft an essay, explaining how marginalized groups responded to their deferred dream of freedom and equality. A particularly poignant point of departure for this essay might be Langston Hughes' (1994) "Harlem" (commonly known as "A Dream Deferred"). After considering this poem, students can use their notes to craft a historical explanation about one group discussed in the inquiry, their history of freedom, and the fights that they still wage for equality in today's society.

Completing this essay has at least two benefits --- one for the teacher and one for the student. For the teacher, the essay provides a way for students to demonstrate their learning not just about historical accounts but about the ways that history continues to influence and be lived out today. For the students, this assignment encourages them to consider ways that history is alive. Rather than the completed "textbook narrative" (Fitzgerald, 2011), this assignment enables students to craft an evolving narrative of history that is alive today.

Taking Action

To deepen students' learning and to engage them in the civic nature of social studies, teachers might encourage students to explore current news stories about other marginalized groups, learning more about their struggles for equality. The Declaration of Independence included a narrow scope of not only "who counted" but "who existed;" while land owning men "counted," only women, African-Americans, and Native Americans "existed," per the document.

Today, we recognize and affirm a great many other groups who continue to fight for equality just as these three groups continue to do. Extending students' learning about groups not specified in the Declaration of Independence is critical to combatting continued prejudice, discrimination, hatred, and exclusion. Enabling students to share what they have learned on their preferred social media sites might help combat the cycles of prejudice that is so pervasive in the virtual environment and that impacts the lived experiences of people in our society.

Conclusion

Throughout the course of history, many groups have been improperly excluded from the fight for equality and freedom. The Declaration of Independence clearly excluded women, African Americans, and Native Americans. Although they would eventually win some of the rights they deserved, gaining those rights was long overdue and still not fully realized today.

After teaching this inquiry, students will get a better understanding of the many ways how women, African Americans, and Native Americans have been historically viewed and treated as well as how they continue to fight for their equality today. Equally important is the extension of this history to consider how other groups are both excluded

today and are fighting for their equal place in society. This inquiry is meant to lift marginalized voices, educating both students and others about the complex, conflicted, and imperfect beginning of the United States of America, celebrating and affirming dreams realized and those yet to be.

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