

Teaching Introduction to Africana Studies: Sustaining a Disciplinary Focus

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Michael Tillotson¹

Abstract

In the American academy, there is quite possibly no other discipline with the history of (Black) Africana Studies. Founded on the idea of struggle and resistance and eventually becoming the intellectual arm of the Black Power movement, the field has for decades institutionalized and established itself as a cogent and coherent academic discipline. The flagship course for the discipline has always been the introductory course from the field's inception. One of the central questions that loom in many Africana circles concerns building egalitarian consensus on the teaching of the introductory course. This work seeks to address that issue by offering plausible guidelines for instructors and practitioners to follow.

Keywords

discipline, field, pedagogy, disciplinary drift

One of the many realities one has to face as a terminal degree holder in African American Studies is the multitude of ways scholars and lay people both inside and outside of the discipline see and understand the field's course

¹University of Pittsburgh, PA, USA

Corresponding Author:

Michael Tillotson, University of Pittsburgh, 4154 Wesley W. Posvar Hall, Pittsburgh, PA 15260, USA.

Email: mtillots@pitt.edu

offerings and how they should be taught. This has been a hot button issue since the inception of the discipline over 40 years ago. A skeptic may find it hard to believe that any academic discipline in existence over four decades is still trying to build consensus on its traditions, especially the teaching of an introductory course. This is not the case with Africana Studies. There are both historical and disciplinary issues that set in place the differences in how one understands the importance of the introductory course, in terms of what is important and what is viable. This work will address ideas related to *Learning Objectives/Best Practices, Choice of Textbook/Standardization, Philosophy of Teaching/Course Sequencing, and Pedagogical Realities* in the introductory course of the discipline. These issues are of paramount importance for Africana Studies and the respective institutional settings in which the introductory course is offered. As Aldridge and Young (2000) posit, "The core curriculum for a model African American/Black Studies program includes an introductory course, which constitutes the first level of studies" (p. 7). In response to this mandate, most Africana Studies departments and many programs offer the introductory course. The introductory course when properly designed and taught in concert within disciplinary boundaries signifies and serves as a marker to broadcast dedication to the epistemological identity of the discipline.

In many instances, the course is also part of a university or college's general education curriculum. This means students from a variety of majors are enrolled and with that comes certain intellectual challenges and opportunities for the introductory course instructor on many levels. Few disciplines rely on an introductory course as heavily as Africana Studies. Because of the unique history on which the field was developed and institutionalized, great care must be taken in how it is taught. As the gateway course to the discipline, introduction to Africana Studies serves as the ambassador or diplomatic branch of the field in a sense. It must be seen as such and given the proper time and dedication to all of its intended purposes. The course must be centered and structured as a platform for disciplinary grounding in Africana Studies for the students.

The introductory course in some cases is the first and last time that many non-majors will perhaps in their lifetime think deeply about and dedicate concentrated study to issues focusing on people of African descent. It is crucial that the instructor's pedagogical repertoire captures the interest and imagination of non-majors, which is of crucial importance in terms of credit hour generation for a department. The introductory course is usually but not always the first course that prospective majors are introduced to in the discipline and a lasting impression must be established on the ideational frameworks of Africana Studies. One of the central questions the introductory

course instructor must ask is how will the syllabus be arranged to cover the basic areas while not overemphasizing or underemphasizing any core subject? This is a distinct quandary for the introductory course. The instructor must keep in mind that the course is a survey project and resist the urge to do everything in too great detail while also not sacrificing rigor or analysis. This article is not imposing a one size fits all approach to teaching introduction to Africana Studies, but this work does seek to offer some basic general parameters of instruction akin to any academic discipline. The author's aim is to offer a plausible exploratory framework of basic structure toward building an egalitarian consensus on teaching introduction to Africana Studies.

Disciplinary Realities

In the early stages of the discipline, there were various ways the introductory course was taught because many of the instructors did not have university instruction in the discipline. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, a segment of the instructors came from the community of protest without any formal college training. In addition to this, as Hall (2000) writes, "In terms of the history of thought in the field, programs that emerged early in the Black Studies movement were often headed and staffed with established academics trained in traditional Eurocentric disciplines" (p. 28). This has led to wide differences in how courses were designed and how the ideas were brought forward. In the 21st century, the introductory course has a different set of challenges that are unique to it and the field.

This contemporary moment asks instructors to be cognizant of the political shifts in education and to be sensitive to the political climate in which one teaches. This reality must remind professors that classroom lecture configurations outside of the historical reflections of the material presented should not be overtly partisan in political voice, without clear attachment to stated course material with historical chronology in focus. Therefore, lectures and ideas should not center exclusively on inflammatory polemics that are polarizing in nature. This situates the course in a non-indoctrinating location and allows all students registered in the course to feel comfortable to engage in a free and open learning environment. This is particularly important in Africana Studies, because of the plethora of erroneous mis-information that has circulated about the field as a tool of progressive politics and it is supposed ensconcing as a liberal enterprise that is unable to entertain alternative viewpoints on issues of race, politics, class, and gender. The instructor must be mindful of and not ignore the lasting hold of biased myth on the prevailing attitudes about the field of Africana Studies. However, because authentic Africana Studies is located in a particular intellectual worldview (African

centered) with Afrocentricity being a widely used theoretical construction should not mean that its courses are the home of a one-sided approach to knowledge. The instructor must understand that it is possible to speak about human agency and social change without alienating students, if a non-partisan political approach is taken.

Existential Concerns

In teaching the introductory course in Africana Studies, there exists a set of challenges that are unique which should be addressed systematically at the department level. Often the instructor is given no advice or counsel about the nature of the course and usually a syllabus that has been used previously is handed to the instructor as a guide. However, in many cases, the syllabus that was offered is itself in error about the basic ideas that must be covered related to the course. This leads to confusion in terms of how the course is designed and a lack of scholarly consistency in the course presentation. This is particularly troublesome for the many instructors in Africana Studies who do not possess the terminal degree in the discipline, who are unable to decipher what is useful. However, this problem is being addressed as more Africana Studies departments are now seeking and hiring only PhD holders in the field, but this will take time to become an institutional requirement.

This challenge is magnified by those professors who came to Africana Studies by default and not design because they were unable to secure a position in the field that they were trained. In this regard, department chairs in Africana Studies must keep a watchful eye and assert critical care to make sure that those instructors from alien disciplines be tutored and monitored in what they teach throughout the course and any resulting resistance by the instructor must be addressed. The course *must* be clearly and distinctively cut from the cloth of the African-centered intellectual tradition, and those specific pedagogical articulations must be reflected in the classroom experience. The instructors with training from outside disciplines must resist their disciplinary prejudices against Africana Studies and teach the course according to its intended purposes. Colon (1982) argues, "This perplexing phenomenon retards the progressive growth and transmission of knowledge seminal to Black Studies" (p. 4). It is suggested that workshops on protocols and best practices be instituted in Africana Studies departments to ensure consistency in the teaching of the introductory course. This would give instructors trained in other fields and eventually students registered for the course the best chance at learning about the discipline and its specific literature and scholarly assumptions. In concert with any course in the American academy, the introductory course in Africana Studies must have a clear set

of learning parameters that are central to its mission. If it does not, then it is located squarely in the boundaries of Daudi Azibo's (2007) reflections on, "Articulating the Distinction Between Black Studies and the Study of Blacks . . ." (p. 525).

The course must be treated purely as a scholarly enterprise and not as a particular space for the aggrieved, unless it has a direct relationship to the course material as illuminated by the content areas. Polarizing rhetorical platforms must not be a central component of the course if it is to serve the needs of the students intellectually as Van Horne (2007) writes, "Are not academic disciplines frameworks for free, open, rigorous, unencumbered and value-neutral inquiry and discourse pertaining to distinctive subject matters of universal scope?" (p. 411). This is particularly important when discussing issues relating to self-determination and its role in the lives of people of African descent, both historically and in a contemporary context. This reality must be given great care and critical consideration in the current social and political climate. Thought must be given by the instructor to the possibility that undergraduate students in the introductory course bring from home 18 to 22 years of social/political indoctrination without the advantage educationally in many cases of developed critical thinking skills. This means that some students may not be as open to or welcoming of strongly delivered alternative viewpoints in terms of the Black experience, although they have registered for the course for a variety of reasons. The instructor must employ a subtle, sophisticated, and nuanced approach, take nothing for granted, and make no assumptions about the students' understanding of the past history of the Black American in the United States. The course can be taught straightforward without any underpinnings of a hidden political agenda from the bully pulpit of the lectern and still remain true to historical realities. As with any institutionalized academic area, the introductory course is not to be used as a platform for any form of indoctrination. The course is a vehicle for equipping undergraduate students with a basic understanding of Africana Studies at the entry course level.

Learning Objectives/Best Practices

The list below serves as a *guide* to offer a plausible consensus on the goals of the course at the end of the semester.

- The student should be knowledgeable of the social, cultural, and historical elements that have contributed to the development of Africana Studies.

- The student should have epistemic fluency of the key ideas, theoretical concepts, scholars, major initiatives, and ideational frameworks within Africana Studies.
- The student should have an understanding of the subject/content areas and definitions, purposes, scope, and direction of Africana Studies

One of the often seen mistakes in the teaching of the introductory course is the well-meaning, good intentioned instructor who treats and teaches it as if it is an introductory course in African American History or African Culture. While these two areas are without question worthwhile subjects, they cannot be the single basis for the course. In the introductory course, these two locations of scholarship are to be treated as only subject/content areas to be covered during the semester. When those two fields are the sole ideas for how the course is taught, the students leave the course without any introduction to or knowledge of the unique paradigms, theories, concepts, and models that Africana Studies has developed over the last 40 years. This violates the intended purpose of the introductory course and is a gross dereliction of duty by the instructor whether intentional or un-intentional. Granting students epistemic fluency of the intellectual landscape and ideational frameworks of Africana Studies at the basic level is an attainable goal for instructors of majors and non-majors in the introductory course. This is the benchmark at the end of the semester when the introduction to Africana Studies course is taught. In addition, Area Studies that was initially developed by the U.S. Department of State and African Diaspora Studies also do not qualify for insertion into the domain of the introductory course as principal ideas. These two areas of knowledge are meaningful pursuits, but not part of the fields unifying perspective, which grounds the student in the discipline's basic ideas and conceptual frameworks.

Terminal degree holders in Black/Africana Studies are not immune to practices that endanger the integrity of the course. Terminal degree holders must not allow personal biases or research agendas to consume the course no matter how meaningful the work they may be engaged in. A PhD holder in Africana Studies who has a published focus in a certain area must not use or teach the course as a larger venue to vet personal research. The instructor must discipline himself or herself to teach the established disciplinary guidelines of the field throughout the duration of the course. This must be done because the introductory course is a survey course and the intellectual temperament of the intended purpose of the course must be maintained and adhered to. This is the basic requirement to the successful teaching of the course that both non-degree holders and terminal degree holders must give conscious thought to in practice and pedagogy.

Choice of Textbook (s) and Standardization

If one were to assess the introductory courses in any field outside of Africana Studies, one would find to a large degree consistent ideas, individuals, and conceptual frameworks that must be covered throughout the duration of the semester. In for example Philosophy according to Christian (2006), “A standard undergraduate philosophy course will start off with Plato and Aristotle; perhaps say something about Augustine, Aquinas and Machiavelli; move on to Hobbes, Locke, Mill and Marx and then wind up with Rawls and Nozick . . .” (p. 76). This is the core or standard intellectual menu and trajectory for an undergraduate Philosophy course across the board with individual variation/modification possible on the fringes of course design. Africana Studies can be no different in this regard because in the introductory course, there are discipline specific ideas that must be part of the course in order for intellectual consistency to be achieved, which has been the goal of the field for quite some time.

There are several texts that have the discipline’s name(s) in the title such as *Introduction to African American Studies* by Talmadge Anderson and James Stewart; *The African American Studies Reader* by Nathaniel Norment; *Africana Studies: Philosophical Perspectives and Theoretical Paradigms*, Edited by Delores P. Aldridge and E. Lincoln James; *Out of the Revolution: The Development of Africana Studies*, by Delores P. Aldridge and Carlene Young; *Black Studies Theory, Method, and Cultural Perspectives* by Talmadge Anderson; *The Handbook of Black Studies* Edited by Molefi Asante and Maulana Karenga; *A Turbulent Voyage: Readings in African American Studies* by Floyd W. Hayes; *Africana Studies: A survey of Africa and the African Diaspora* by Mario Azevedo; and *Peoples College Primer* by Alkalimat and associates. This list is not meant to be exhaustive but represents books that are in use today that specifically address the discipline and its realities.

In terms of strict disciplinary focus for the introductory course, one of the most widely used texts is California State University at Long Beach-Black Studies professor Maulana Karenga’s book, *Introduction to Black Studies*. Karenga’s text, now in its fourth edition, by design explicitly grounds the student in the social, historical, philosophical, epistemological, axiological, and ontological distinctions of the discipline. The book is set up in a systematic fashion that addresses the major subject/content areas in addition to covering briefly many of the theoretical and methodological components of the discipline as well. This is critical in any introductory text but absolutely essential in (Black) Africana Studies because of the constant flow of misinformation about the field. It gives the student a wide-ranging aerial view of

the field as well the disciplines antagonist's perspectives and viewpoints. The text has references and study questions at the end of every chapter, which is quite useful to students in a survey introductory course. The index and pictures serve a very useful purpose centering the student on the often used terms in the field and the pictures draw the student into the historical moments.

Karenga's unique history with the discipline as an historical actor is on full display, and the narrative voice in the book creates a connecting human synergy that students will find informative in their use of the book. The text can be used as the central text while previously mentioned texts can be added as supplemental works as the instructor sees fit as long as the intellectual spirit of the course is not compromised. The Karenga text is clearly designed for the introductory course because that is its intended audience. Karenga (2002) writes, "This text is essentially a contribution to the efforts to develop a standard body of discipline specific literature for Black Studies. Its basic aim is to offer a definitive introduction to the discipline" (p. xxiv). Karenga continues,

Toward achieving this basic aim, several objectives have guided the preparation of this text: (1) to introduce and define the origins, relevance and scope of Black Studies; (2) to introduce, define and discuss critically the seven core areas of Black Studies, i.e. Black History, Black Religion, Black Social Organization, Black Politics, Black Economics, Black Creative Production and Black Psychology; (3) to introduce and define key concepts in the discipline and each subject area; (4) to delineate fundamental issues and areas for critical discussion in the discipline and each subject areas; (5) to introduce and discuss critically major challenges facing Black Studies; (6) to introduce fundamental literature in the discipline of Black Studies and its core subject areas; and (7) to raise provocative questions about the Black experience which cultivate the use of and on appreciation for inquiry and analysis as indispensable tools to an effective grasp and critical discussion of Black Studies. (p. xxiv)

The text takes into full account the possibility that the student may be learning about (Black) Africana Studies for the first time and employs no liberties in the assumption of knowledge by the student. It is within these basic boundaries that the text serves the needs of the students in the introductory course.

Philosophy of Teaching—Course Sequencing

As in all academic disciplines, there is a preferred pedagogy to teaching an introductory course, although there are different conceptualizations and specific ideas that routinely are covered. Africana Studies is no different;

henceforth, offered here is a plausible way to approach the course while maintaining the uniqueness of the field. In the author's view, the introductory course should not be the isolated province of adjunct's or newly minted PhDs. According to Colon (1982), "Successful teaching involves finding new ways to package and convey knowledge. Employing fresh and creative teaching techniques is as critical to Black Studies as is the building of the field's knowledge base" (p. 11). The course would benefit from senior professors who possess a deep structural and organic understanding of the discipline and can translate their knowledge to the course and undergraduate students. The seasoned veteran instructor also benefits in that she or he also stays in tune with the latest information and pedagogical approaches to the introductory course and the field. Africana Studies must not completely follow in lockstep the model of other disciplines where senior professors isolate themselves in graduate teaching and research. A more flexible approach to who teaches the course is in the best interest of the students and the discipline.

In tone and tenor, the classroom where introduction to Africana Studies is being taught is not the place for rigid, dogmatic, ideologically driven messages to be transmitted to students. In that regard, a focus on so-called "identity politics" is better left for other courses and not well suited to the first and perhaps the last course that many non-majors will ever possibly take concerning people of African descent. For the neophyte as well as the seasoned instructor, it is important to understand that discussing issues of agency surrounding the Black experience can be taught without digressing to a one-sided sermon of racial and ideological polarization. When this is done, it is possible that students may sense that the period of instruction is breaking down and they could lose confidence in the instruction and misinterpret the intended nature of the course.

Epistemic fluency of Africana Studies is the disciplinary goal of the introductory course and not the development of students who are looking to be entertained by highly charged polemical speeches. In the end, when this approach is emphasized throughout the course, it leaves students without a grounded working knowledge of the ideas of the discipline. When the corpus of thought located in the intellectual enterprise of Africana Studies becomes secondary in pedagogical practices, *disciplinary drift* occurs. Disciplinary Drift is the problematic of not placing the disciplinary frameworks of Africana Studies first in the teaching of the introductory course. This occurs when instructors do not possess conceptual knowledge of and/or refuse to employ the basic ideas of Africana Studies and design the course around individualized personal biases. Speaking to this issue in a larger context, Tillotson and McDougal (2013) identify this as *Boutique Scholarship* that the authors

define as “work that is self-satisfying to the researcher but does not advance the collective interests of African descended people” (p. 107). The present work locates this type of scholarly behavior as not being in the best interests of the discipline. Disciplinary Drift is possible with both terminal degree holders in Africana Studies and non-degree holders. It is of great importance that maverick-rogue scholars be attended to by department chairpersons and quieted in their malfeasant efforts to please themselves at the expense of the discipline.

The spirit of this work is not intended to impose restrictive standardization or constrict and stifle the wide variations possible in (how) instructors teach the course. However, there must be guidelines in place concerning classroom pedagogical conduct that at least should be considered. The intent and purpose is to offer a working template for (what) areas should be taught in the course and the standardization of sequencing to maintain disciplinary unification. The areas are as follows:

1. Socio-Historical Development,
2. Paradigms, Theories, Concepts, Models
3. Subject/Content Areas

Conclusion

The introductory course plays a vital role in Africana Studies. It lays the ground work and sets the climate for a wider understanding and appreciation of the epistemological role, mission, purpose, and function of the discipline. It deserves a serious address of *what* is consistently taught and the ways in which it is introduced to students. As stakeholders and willing gatekeepers of the vision of intellectual ancestors, the current practitioners in Africana Studies must put forth the effort to be wedded to the conceptualization and contextualization of a consistent pedagogical rubric that fits the goals and realities of the field. Instructors who are committed to the discipline must be steeled and place *duty* before the self to make sure that epistemic fluency of the basic ideas of Africana Studies is the intended outcome of the course everywhere and every time it is taught.

In the American academy, Africana Studies has institutionalized and established itself as a cogent, coherent intellectual discipline. The introductory course is the flagship course that is of premier importance in the continued progress of the field as Africana Studies moves forward in the 21st century. It is historically known that those who have wandered by happenstance into the field will continue to resist the established pedagogical practices of Africana Studies. Therefore, authentic practitioners in Africana

Studies must be vigilant and remain steadfast in the teaching, maintenance, and application of consistent scholarly praxis that serves the needs of the students, the discipline, and the academy on every level. This is possible as honest brokers in the field continue to take charge and uphold the critical importance of the course—*Introduction to Africana Studies*.

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Author Biography

Michael Tillotson received the PhD in African American Studies from Temple University. He is the author of the book: "Invisible Jim Crow: Contemporary Ideological Threats to the Internal Security of African Americans," and currently an assistant professor in the department of Africana Studies at The University of Pittsburgh.