

Difficult Subjects

In 2020-21, the **Difficult Subjects: K-12 Teaching Institute** brought together 17 pre-K, kindergarten, elementary, middle and high school teachers from twelve schools and 3 school districts in Central Ohio for a year-long exploration of multidisciplinary approaches to understanding and teaching American slavery.

Multidisciplinary approaches demystify normative narratives. They help students unlearn misconceptions about a subject by providing them with different lenses through which they can interrogate what they believe to be true. The arts and humanities, in particular, offer new lines of sight, helping students see differently what

they have already seen and think critically about what they have accepted as truth.

The institute had a profound impact on the participants. Shannon Griffin, a fourth-grade teacher at Olentangy Heritage Elementary School, reported that the institute provided her with “an entirely new way of teaching the subject.” Kristin Marconi, an eighth-grade American history teacher at Olentangy Orange Middle School, developed mapping and research activities for her students using the Freedom on the Move database. “I can’t wait to do this lesson in class and have the students create our own class map each year,” she said.

“In a time when teachers are being pressured to dismiss rather than discuss historical experiences and people’s identities, teaching difficult subjects has become unusually hard. Multidisciplinary approaches provide a way out of this morass. For teachers, multi-disciplinary approaches enable teaching topics from different angles, thereby avoiding many current political pitfalls while still teaching challenging content honestly, accurately and effectively. In other words, art, music, literature and creative writing can all be used to teach a difficult social studies subject like slavery.”

HASAN KWAME JEFFRIES,
Institute Director and Associate Professor of History

