

Learning “Hard Histories”: Student Experiences of Learning about the Antebellum Slave Trade

Current discourse in the political wars against history posits that students do not need to learn difficult histories because it causes guilt and shame for modern students. This SoTL project explores the veracity of that claim by exploring what it was like for students in History 114 (US History to 1877) to learn hard histories, based on their intellectual, physiological, and emotional responses to three lessons on antebellum cotton slavery. This project draws on the SoTL work of Barbara Cruz (2009), Nancy Ogden et al (2008), and Maia Sheppard (2010) to assess students’ experiences learning about the relationship between slavery and capitalism, the domestic slave trade, and the lived experience of enslaved peoples. Likert-type questions affirmed student discomfort with learning hard histories while qualitative responses revealed that students found learning important and relevant for understanding structural racism today.