

Lesson Plan

Physicist Activist:

Dr. Elmer Imes and the Civil Rights Case of Juliette Derricotte



*Left: Juliette Derricotte, image courtesy the Fisk University Special Collections.
Center: Elmer Samuel Imes, Fisk University, image courtesy AIP Emilio Segre Visual Archives.
Right: W. E. B. Du Bois in 1918, image courtesy the Library of Congress.*

Grade Level(s): 9-12

Subject(s): History

In-Class Time: 60-90 min

Prep Time: 15-20 min

Materials

- Internet access
- (optional): A/V equipment
- Photocopies of AIP Elmer Imes Handout
- Photocopies of Primary Sources for each student (see Supplemental Materials)

Objective

Students will learn about prominent African American physicist Elmer Imes who headed the physics department at Fisk University. They will learn about his involvement in the civil rights case of Juliette Derricotte and about racial segregation in the 1930s. **Note:** this lesson works very well alongside the AIP Teaching Guide “Dr. Elmer Imes and Spectroscopy.” This Guide explores a historical tragedy that Elmer Imes became involved in; the related Teaching Guide explores Imes’ personal history and scientific work in spectroscopy, and provides a hands-on activity involving spectroscopy.

Introduction

On the afternoon of November 6, 1931, Juliette Derricotte and three students from Fisk University were in an automobile accident in Dalton, Georgia on their way to visit Dericotte’s mother. Derricotte, an African American educator and prominent national figure from Chattanooga, Tennessee and Dean of Women at Fisk University, was rushed to a hospital in Dalton along with the other injured students. That hospital, however, refused to serve African American patients and Derricotte was transported first to a physician’s office and then to the home of a woman named Mrs. Wilson who often hosted African American patients who were denied entry at white-only hospitals. Though a safe haven for the injured, Mrs. Wilson did not have the medical training nor the medical equipment needed to help the injured patients. Upon hearing that Derricotte and the students were injured, three professors from Fisk University – physicist Elmer Imes, chemist Saint Elmo Brady, and musicologist Warner Lawson – rushed to Georgia by car to be of assistance.

Tragically, Ms. Derricotte and a student passed away in the early morning of November 7, 1931. Their deaths sparked outrage and protests amongst African Americans across the country and especially at Fisk University. At the insistence of Imes—who had become chair of the Physics Department at Fisk in 1930—and others, the NAACP did an investigation of the case, receiving testimony from those at the scene including Elmer Imes himself. Later, renowned activist W.E.B. Du Bois published an article on the incident in *Crisis*, the NAACP’s national magazine, titled “Dalton, Georgia.” The famous Harlem Renaissance writer Langston Hughes also wrote about the case.

In this lesson, students will read letters written by Dr. Elmer Imes about the incident, and the article that Du Bois wrote for *Crisis*. By comparing and contrasting these different historical sources, students will search for the “truths” of what happened on November 7, 1931 and the following days. They will learn how to gather evidence in order to make an argument about a historical event. Students will also learn about segregation and the struggle for civil rights in the 1930s and how a physicist, who may seem an unlikely activist, became involved in that struggle.

Instructions/Activities

Engage: 10-15 Minutes

Students will briefly be introduced to the era of Jim Crow segregation, the emergence and role of the NAACP, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Dr. Elmer Imes via a short lecture by the teacher.

What is the teacher doing?

Introduce students to Jim Crow segregation (including the distinction between de jure and de facto segregation), the NAACP, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Elmer Imes through a short lecture.

What are the students doing?

Observe the introductory lecture and internalize Jim Crow segregation, what functions the NAACP performed, and who W.E.B. du Bois and Elmer Imes were.

Explore Part 1: 10-15 Minutes

There are two distinct parts of the exploration section of this lesson plan. In the first, students will split into small groups and read the Du Bois article, “Dalton, Georgia.”

What is the teacher doing?

Split the students into small groups. Distribute copies of the Du Bois article to the students to read and discuss in these groups. Have students

What are the students doing?

Split into small groups. Receive copies of W.E.B. Du Bois’ article. Read the article as groups, then discuss the details of the article and what

conclude what happened to Juliette Derricotte and the other students.	happened to Juliette Derricotte and the students from Fisk University (instructions for discussion are found below in the explanation section).
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Explain Part 1: 10-15 Minutes

There are two distinct parts of the explanation section of this lesson plan. In the first part, students will discuss Du Bois’ article within their small groups.	
<p>What is the teacher doing? Ensure that student discussions of the Du Bois article address the events in Dalton and how segregation influenced them. Lead students to question the key decisions and where the fault lied.</p>	<p>What are the students doing? After reading the Du Bois article, discuss the details as small groups. Then note the events in Dalton and how segregation influenced them. Question the key decisions and where the fault lied.</p>

Explore Part 2: 10-15 Minutes

Continued from “Explore Part 1.” Students will now read and discuss Elmer Imes’ letters to W.E.B. Du Bois and Blanchard.	
<p>What is the teacher doing? After students have discussed the first article, distribute copies of Imes’ letters. Again, instruct them to read and discuss these documents as groups.</p>	<p>What are the students doing? After the first discussions, receive copies of Elmer Imes’ letters. Read the letters as groups, then discuss the details.</p>

Explain Part 2: 10-15 Minutes

Continued from “Explore Part 2.” Students will now discuss Imes’ letters to Du Bois and Blanchard within their small groups.	
<p>What is the teacher doing? After the students read the letters, ensure that they discuss the details and develop a clearer understanding of the events of November 6, as well as how Imes personally reacted to the tragedy.</p>	<p>What are the students doing? Read the Imes letters. Discuss the details and how they describe the events in Dalton, as well as how Imes personally reacted to this tragedy.</p>

Elaborate: 10-15 Minutes

After working in small groups, the class will reconvene and discuss together what they have learned about how segregation impacted African Americans. Teachers will provide the Discussion Questions (located in the Supplemental Materials) for the students to answer and possibly submit.	
<p>What is the teacher doing? Instruct the students to reconvene as a class. Provide the Discussion Questions (from the Supplemental Materials) and help generate beneficial conversations and questions. If necessary, have students complete and submit answers to the discussion questions individually for evaluation.</p>	<p>What are the students doing? Exit small groups and reconvene as a class. Discuss together how segregation impacted African Americans. Address the Discussion Questions provided by the teacher, and if necessary complete them individually for submission and evaluation.</p>

Evaluation:

If desired, the teacher may collect answers to the Discussion Questions from the elaboration section to conduct teacher evaluations of student work.

Required/Recommended Reading and Resources

- Elmer Imes Biographical Handout
- Primary source documents
 - Imes, Elmer Samuel, 1883-1941. Letter from Elmer S. Imes to Leslie Blanchard, November 9, 1931. W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312). Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries. (Found in Supplemental Materials)
 - Imes, Elmer Samuel, 1883-1941. Letter from Elmer S. Imes to W. E. B. Du Bois, November 13, 1931. W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312). Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries. (Found in Supplemental Materials)
 - Du Bois, W. E. B. (William Edward Burghardt), 1868-1963. Dalton, Georgia, ca. March 1932. W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312). Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.
<http://credo.library.umass.edu/view/full/mums312-b211-i067>. Teachers will project, provide computer/internet access-to, or print out copies of this document for students.

Discussion Questions

Discussion Questions can be found as a Handout with a corresponding Answer Key in the Supplemental Materials to this lesson plan.

1. What was life like for African Americans in the South in the 1930s?
2. What is segregation? What is the difference between de jure and de facto segregation? In addition to hospitals, what other American institutions were segregated?
3. What happened to Juliette Derricotte and the students from Fisk University? How did racial segregation affect the outcome?
4. Why did the NAACP launch an investigation of the events in Dalton, Georgia?
5. Reflect on the excerpt from Ethel Gilbert's letter in "Dalton, Georgia." How does she compare the treatment she would have received as a white woman to that received by Juliette Derricotte and her friends?
6. Is it surprising that a physicist could also be an activist? Why or why not?

Further Reading and Additional Resources

Readings on Elmer Imes and segregation:

- David Levering Lewis, *W.E.B. Du Bois, 1919-1963: The Fight for Equality and the American Century* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, LLC, 2000), 297-301.
- Ronald E. Mickens, "Elmer Samuel Imes: Scientist, Inventor, Teacher, Scholar," in Ronald E. Mickens (ed.), *Edward Bouchet: the first African-American doctorate* (New Jersey: World Scientific, 2002), 101-107.

- Henry Louis Gates, “Springfield Race Riot, the Founding of the NAACP, and the Beginning of The Crisis,” *Life Upon These Shores*, 241-243.

Resources on the Harlem Renaissance:

- Library of Congress, “A Guide to Harlem Renaissance Materials,” <http://www.loc.gov/rr/program/bib/harlem/harlem.html>. The materials include photographs, oral histories, and other resources.
- DVD/Video: Marino Amoruso, Cab Calloway, Duke Ellington, Count Basie, and Nat King Cole, *Swingin' Uptown: Renaissance in Harlem*, (West Long Branch, N.J.: Kultur, 2004).
- DVD/Video: Amber Edwards, Joe Morton, William Elmer Harmon, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Alain Locke, *Against the Odds: The Artists of the Harlem Renaissance*, (Arlington, VA: PBS Home Video, 2006).

Extensions

- Related AIP Teacher’s Guides on Women and Minorities in the Physical Sciences:
 - Dr. Elmer Imes and Spectroscopy

Common Core Standards

For more information on Common Core Standards, visit <http://www.corestandards.org/>.

Speaking & Listening	
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1	Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.4	Present information, findings, and supporting evidence clearly, concisely, and logically such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, substance, and style are appropriate to purpose, audience, and task.
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.1	Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 11-12 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.4	Present information, findings, and supporting evidence, conveying a clear and distinct perspective, such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning, alternative or opposing perspectives are addressed, and the organization, development, substance, and style are appropriate to purpose, audience, and a range of formal and informal tasks.
History/Social Studies	
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.1	Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, attending to such features as the date and origin of the information.

<u>CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.2</u>	Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of how key events or ideas develop over the course of the text.
<u>CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.3</u>	Analyze in detail a series of events described in a text; determine whether earlier events caused later ones or simply preceded them.
<u>CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.4</u>	Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including vocabulary describing political, social, or economic aspects of history/social science.
<u>CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.6</u>	Compare the point of view of two or more authors for how they treat the same or similar topics, including which details they include and emphasize in their respective accounts.
<u>CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.8</u>	Assess the extent to which the reasoning and evidence in a text support the author's claims.
<u>CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.10</u>	Compare and contrast treatments of the same topic in several primary and secondary sources.
<u>CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.1</u>	Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, connecting insights gained from specific details to an understanding of the text as a whole.
<u>CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.2</u>	Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas.
<u>CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.3</u>	Evaluate various explanations for actions or events and determine which explanation best accords with textual evidence, acknowledging where the text leaves matters uncertain.

Next Generation Science Standards

For more information on the Next Generation Science Standards, visit <http://www.nextgenscience.org/>.
N/A