



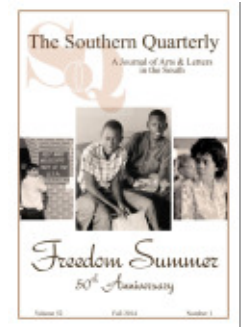
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Teaching Freedom Summer

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This section highlights the central importance organizers placed on education as a tool for empowerment in the Council of Federated Organizations' 1964 Mississippi Summer Project—better known as Freedom Summer—and the Freedom Summer teaching tradition that continues a half-century after the summer's end. Mississippians have commemorated the fiftieth anniversary of Freedom Summer this year on college campuses, in civic spaces, in churches, and other places. Round-number anniversaries such as this can be times for nostalgia and maudlin remembrance, but they also offer an opportunity for especially focused reflection, for teaching, and for finding meaning.

Freedom Summer had three main goals: to register African American voters in large numbers, to create a new political party (an alternative to the state's Democrats) from scratch, and to create autonomous community institutions anchored by Freedom Schools that taught alternative values along with literacy, civics, African American history, and other subjects. Freedom Summer volunteers canvassed black neighborhoods throughout the state to register voters, put the basic organizational building blocks of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party in place, and taught students of all ages in Freedom Schools. The organizers' experience in Mississippi before 1964 had convinced them that while registering voters and participating in the political process was important, there could be no systemic, long-term change for black Mississippians without a completely new and different approach to education.

"What is relevant to our lives is constantly defined for us," Charles Cobb complained in 1963. Cobb, a field organizer for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, suggested that as long as whites controlled the means

of blacks' education in the state, African Americans could never truly be free. He wanted blacks to control their own schools, where they could teach subjects that were important to them and instill their own values. Above all, he wanted to encourage black Mississippians to ask questions: Why were they poor? Why couldn't they vote? He proposed the creation of the Freedom Schools in that vein: "To encourage questions is to encourage challenge, which is to encourage overthrow." Education, he knew, could be and was used to impose social and political control in Mississippi, but it also had radically transformative power. We present this special section in that spirit.

In the article "'A Stalking Horse for the Civil Rights Movement': Head Start and the Legacy of the Freedom Schools," historian Beverly Tomek focuses on a relatively understudied but long-lived aspect of the Freedom Schools, examining the ways that civil rights activists and federal bureaucrats were able to build the Head Start program on the Freedom Schools model. Head Start's creators had to walk a tightrope: the bureaucrats responsible for implementing it clearly shared the civil rights movement's basic goals, and they learned lessons from Freedom Summer about the benefits such schools could offer to local communities. Yet they had to avoid the appearance of friendliness to the movement lest white resisters like the author of a *Jackson Daily News* editorial take them to task for creating "one of the most subtle mediums for instilling the acceptance of racial integration and ultimate mongrelization ever perpetrated in this country" disguised as a preschool program. Tomek argues that they were able to walk the tightrope successfully, but that constant criticism from civil rights resisters prevented Democrats from fully building the case for a class-, not race-based approach to the War on Poverty, and kept Head Start programs in Mississippi from reaching their fullest potential.

Sociologist Barbara Harris Combs and anthropologist Jodi Skipper locate their own methods of teaching their students at the University of Mississippi about Freedom Summer in the tradition of Ernst Borinski, a sociologist who taught for four decades at Tougaloo College, which was and is an important institution in the Mississippi movement in its own right. Borinski excelled at creating safe spaces in which African Americans and whites could gather to discuss the issues that impacted their lives. Combs and Skipper endorse his methods, and they encourage fellow teachers not to shy away from exposing their students to the terrors Freedom Summer participants faced. "[T]hose who speak truth to power," they insist, "must be more concerned about arriving at truth than at hurting someone else's feelings," even in a classroom setting. Arguing that teaching "an event in history alone is not enough," they recommend embedding lessons on Freedom Summer in the long history of American racism and efforts to combat it. Finally, Combs and Skipper suggest

songs, memoirs, and place-based learning techniques that have served them well in teaching about Freedom Summer.

Journalism professors Christopher P. Campbell and Gina M. Chen report on their experience teaching a workshop on journalism and multimedia storytelling to Mississippi high school students through the lens of 50th anniversary events in Hattiesburg. As workshop organizers, they were able to introduce students to local civil rights activists and Freedom Summer volunteers, along with journalists who covered the events and documentary filmmakers who came to Mississippi to preview “Freedom Summer,” a film that debuted on PBS stations throughout the United States shortly thereafter. Campbell and Chen found that “the opportunity to report and tell the extraordinary stories of the activists and volunteers who participated in Freedom Summer was itself a transformational experience” for the students—which is very much in keeping with the organizing tradition of Freedom Summer itself and the educational philosophy it bequeathed us.

Finally, in “Freedom Summer and Its Legacies in the Classroom,” Nicole Burrowes, Laura Helton, LaTasha B. Levy, and Deborah E. McDowell recount their experiences leading a remarkable series of courses at the University of Virginia during the 50th-anniversary summer. In teaching the subject, they write, “We worked throughout to create a slice of the 1964 Freedom Summer campaign, with special attention to the philosophy and pedagogy underlying the Freedom Schools.” Moreover, they extended this philosophy and pedagogy to teach about areas, issues, and personalities beyond Mississippi’s borders, through mapping exercises, service-learning components, and other forms of outside-the-classroom education, and experimented with Freedom Summer-style approaches to contemporary problems. As with the other examples provided in this section, theirs is an approach that other educators might do well to emulate. When we encourage tough dialogue among diverse groups of students the way Ernst Borinski did, when we encourage students to question *everything* the way Charles Cobb did, when we escape campus to work with real people on real problems the way the University of Virginia scholars have, we extend the tradition of Freedom Summer-style education.

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WORK CITED

- Cobb, Charles. Some Notes on Education, c. 1960s. TS. Michael J. Miller Civil Rights Collection (M368). McCain Library & Archives, U of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg. *Civil Rights in Mississippi Digital Archive*. U of Southern Mississippi Digital Collections. Web. 26 Aug. 2014.