

ACTIVITY

Staging the Compelling Question

Overview

About This Activity

Students explore the ideas behind the compelling question for this inquiry: How do we reckon with a history full of complexities and contradictions? They engage with a quote from James Baldwin—“American history is longer, larger, more various, more beautiful, and more terrible than anything anyone has ever said about it¹”—to generate curiosity about the inquiry and begin thinking about the complexities of US history.

Compelling Question

How do we reckon with a history full of complexities and contradictions?

Procedure

Activity 1: Introduce the Inquiry’s Themes

Explain to students that over the course of this inquiry, they will be exploring the contradictions and complexities within the history of the founding of the United States, including these:

- The ideals reflected in our founding documents
- How those ideals compared to the government established in the new nation
- The experiences of people denied rights and freedoms during the founding era

Project this quote from James Baldwin:

American history is longer, larger, more various, more beautiful, and more terrible than anything anyone has ever said about it.²

—James Baldwin

Activity 2: Reflect on a Quote from James Baldwin

Using the [Big Paper](#) teaching strategy, place the James Baldwin quote at the top of a sheet of poster paper (create multiple copies if needed for a larger class) and give students enough time to have a written discussion about the quote in complete silence. The following questions can help guide their discussion:

1. What questions, thoughts, connections, or feelings does this quote raise for you?

¹ Baldwin, “A Talk to Teachers.”

² Ibid.

2. What are some moments, events, or stories in US history that you consider to be beautiful or terrible?
3. Why might people have chosen to tell an incomplete or one-sided story of US history?