

Thoreau and the Philosophy of Simplicity

Lesson Plan

Grade Level: 9-12

Curriculum Focus: Literature

Lesson Duration: 2 or 3 class periods

Student Objectives

- Students will understand that acquisitiveness and simplicity can be opposing life philosophies.
- Students will participate in a panel discussion that imagines what other great personalities might have thought of these philosophies.

Materials

- Discovery School video on *unitedstreaming: Great Books: Walden*
Search for this video by using the video title (or a portion of it) as the keyword.

Selected clips that support this lesson plan:

- The Transcendentalists in Concord, Massachusetts
 - Thoreau's Life on Walden Pond
 - Author Profile: Henry David Thoreau
 - The Simplicity Movement
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- Biographical reference works (primary and secondary sources)
 - Paper (for audience evaluation charts)
 - Pencils or pen

Procedures

1. Open the lesson by explaining how creative works have been built around the following question: What would happen if people who could never have met in real life somehow convened? Tell students they are going to create a television show in which a panel of prominent people discuss their ideas and opinions about simplicity as a lifestyle.
2. Henry David Thoreau will be one of the panel experts. Students will select the others, creating a mix of people with similar and different life experiences. They will also choose a topic for the panel to discuss—for example, the role materialism plays in each panelist's life.
3. Ask students: What do you think a moderator's role and responsibilities are? Explain that for the television show they're creating, the moderator will be responsible for the following:

- Setting up the room or auditorium to make discussion easy and to help the audience hear questions and responses
 - Developing a list of questions for the panel
 - Explaining why the panel has been brought together
 - Introducing the panelists and creating a name tent for each to sit behind
 - Clearly stating each question, directing it to either the entire panel or to a specific panelist
 - Making sure all panelists have the chance to respond to questions and other panelists' answers
 - Calling on panelists who indicate they have questions for one another
 - Pointing out to the audience the issues on which panelists seem to agree and those on which they seem to disagree
 - Watching the time and eliminating planned questions, where necessary
 - Opening the floor to questions from the audience after the moderator and panelists have asked their questions
 - Closing the show by summing up the discussion and thanking participants and audience members
4. Then give students the panelists' responsibilities:
- Becoming very familiar with the panelist they are playing, using primary and secondary sources to research his or her life
 - Determining what the person might have thought about particular issues
 - Thinking about the overarching topic and preparing opinions and responses that reflect those of the panelist they are playing
 - Contributing to the panel discussion by actively listening to the other panelists and following up with questions or comments
 - Giving fellow panelists time to respond and not monopolizing the discussion
5. You may want to divide the class into two or more panel groups. For each, select students to play the moderator and Thoreau. You can either have students suggest additional panelists or use the following list to assign roles to the remaining student.
- Mahatma Gandhi
 - Cornelius Vanderbilt
 - Henry Ford
 - Andrew Carnegie
 - Bill Gates
 - Mother Teresa

6. Give students an opportunity to research their characters in depth and to learn enough about the other characters so they can engage in a meaningful panel discussion. (The moderator should become reasonably familiar with all the characters.)
7. Have students meet for a practice panel discussion. This will allow them to “meet” the other characters in their group and to learn what questions the moderator has planned before they appear in front of an audience.
8. As a class, develop an audience evaluation chart that can be used to rate each student’s panel participation on a scale of one (poor) to three (good). Here are some of the qualities you may want to include:
 - Familiarity with details of subject’s life
 - Clear, easy-to-hear speaking skills
 - Level of participation
 - Quality of questions asked

Assessment

Use the following three-point rubric to evaluate students’ work during this lesson.

- **3 points:** Students thoroughly researched their subject; actively participated in the panel discussion; demonstrated clear, easy-to-hear speaking skills; averaged a “3” on the majority of the audience evaluation sheets.
- **2 points:** Students researched their subject; participated in the panel discussion; demonstrated somewhat clear, easy-to-hear speaking skills; averaged a “2” on the majority of the audience evaluation sheets.
- **1 point:** Students didn’t complete necessary research; did not participate in the panel discussion; averaged a “1” on the majority of the audience evaluation sheets.

Vocabulary

abolitionist

Definition: In support of ending or abolishing slavery

Context: Many of Concord’s leading citizens were active in or supported the abolitionist movement.

imperialism

Definition: The policy of extending a nation’s authority by territorial acquisition

Context: Thoreau had strong opinions about slavery and imperialism, both of which he considered moral issues.

oversoul

Definition: The absolute reality and basis of all existences; a spiritual being in which the ideal nature imperfectly manifested in human beings is perfectly realized

Context: Transcendentalists believed in an oversoul that pervades all of creation.

renaissance

Definition: A revival of intellectual or artistic achievement and vigor

Context: Concord earned the reputation as the home of the American literary renaissance thanks to the Transcendentalists.

Trancendentalism

Definition: A philosophy that asserts the primacy of the spiritual and transcendental over the material and empirical

Context: Most of the people involved with Transcendentalism were also interested in social reform.

Academic Standards

Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL)

McREL's Content Knowledge: A Compendium of Standards and Benchmarks for K-12 Education addresses 14 content areas. To view the standards and benchmarks, visit link:

<http://www.mcrel.org/compendium/browse.asp>

This lesson plan addresses the following national standards:

- Language Arts—Listening and Speaking: Uses listening and speaking strategies for different purposes
- Life Skills—Thinking and Reasoning: Understands and applies the basic principles of presenting an argument

The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE)

The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and the International Reading Association have developed national standards to provide guidelines for teaching the English language arts. To view the standards online, go to <http://www.ncte.org/about/over/standards/110846.htm>

This lesson plan addresses the following NCTE standards:

- Students conduct research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions, and by posing problems. They gather, evaluate, and synthesize data from a variety of sources (e.g., print and non-print texts, artifacts, and people) to communicate their discoveries in ways that suit their purpose and audience.
- Students participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of a variety of literacy communities.
- Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics).
- Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information).

Support Materials

Develop custom worksheets, educational puzzles, online quizzes, and more with the free teaching tools offered on the Discoveryschool.com Web site. Create and print support materials, or save them to a Custom Classroom account for future use. To learn more, visit

- <http://school.discovery.com/teachingtools/teachingtools.html>

