

Lesson Plans By Darrin Berard
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The following lesson plan grew out of my experiences attending the NEH Landmarks of American History Teacher Workshop: *Living and Writing Deliberately: The Concord Landscapes and Legacy of Henry Thoreau*. I attended the workshop from July 16, 2017 to July 21, 2017. My lessons reflect four specific strands from the workshop: “Being Awake, Aware, and Alive,” “Hearing the Different Drummer,” “Practicing Simplicity,” and “Choosing a Life with Principle.” You will find two lesson plans per thread, all of which use Thoreau’s writing and ideas as anchors for larger learning. These lessons could be utilized separately to emphasize core concepts at different points in the year, or together as part of a larger unit. A couple of the lessons provide an introduction to something that would actually be an ongoing part of the classroom throughout the academic year.

Lesson #1: Finding the Write Space: What Thoreau’s Desk Can Tell Us

Curriculum Thread: Being Awake, Aware and Alive

Objective: The purpose of this lesson is to get students to be *aware of* and to consider where they write in an effort to maximize their effectiveness as writers by creating optimal conditions for deep reflection.

Procedures, Materials, and Essential Questions: Thoreau said in 1847: “I sit before my green desk ... and attend to my thinking.” Like his mentor Ralph Waldo Emerson—and countless other writers—Thoreau had a specific workspace to record his thoughts. Thoreau’s desk can be viewed inside the Concord Museum, along with Emerson’s study, which contains the round table and rocking chair at which Emerson wrote. These objects can also be viewed at the Emerson House at 28 Cambridge Turnpike in Concord, diagonally a short walk across the street from the Concord Museum. Images of these items can also be viewed at the Concord Museum’s website, if a field trip is not possible, at www.concordmuseum.org.

Begin by showing students images of the desks or the actual physical ones on display. Then ask students to “read” those objects. For instance, they could consider: *What does Thoreau’s desk say about his attitudes toward writing? Why do you believe Thoreau had a designated space for writing? How important was the physical space where Thoreau wrote to what he wrote?*

Eventually, the focus should turn back to the students themselves; they will reflect on how and where they write. Overall, this lesson should help students discover the link that people who value writing make with having a space worthy of and conducive to such an activity.

Recommendations for Assessing Student Learning:

- Have students photograph their own workspace. It does not need to be a desk. Tell students that it should reflect where they most often write, even if it is not the place they write *every* time.
- Then, have students record what they notice in the photograph. They should catalogue as many specific details as possible about what is depicted, including any needed context that is not clear from the photo. For instance, if the location in which the photo was taken is not immediately clear from the photo, it should be stated.
- Finally, have students reflect on what they see in writing. Ideas they should consider: *What do they think that workspace says about how they value (or perhaps devalue) writing? What elements of that environment help them to complete their writing well? What elements perhaps distract or detract from the purpose of writing? What improvements could be made? Would that be possible?*
- Students should submit their written work, along with the photo. They could also “exhibit” their findings for their classmates in small or large group discussion. As a variation, you could consider having students share their photo with a partner *before* they reveal their own findings, and have that partner catalogue what they notice in their classmate’s photo.

Lesson #2: How technology affects us in positive and negative ways: Reflections on Walden Pond and Thoreauvian Observations

Curriculum Thread: Practicing Simplicity

Objective: The purpose of this lesson is to get students to examine the impact that technology has on their daily lives—in both positive and negative ways.

Procedures, Materials, and Essential Questions: Thoreau appeared acutely aware of both the positive and negative effects technology could have; in his day, the major advancement was the introduction of railroad service in Concord. The railroad, in fact, travelled right by his cabin at Walden Pond. While the railroad offered new convenience (easy access, for instance, to neighboring Boston), it

damaged the tranquility of the natural landscape. Most importantly, technology and our chase for “better” lives distracted from what Thoreau believed to be our true purpose. He wrote in *Walden*: “Most of the luxuries, and many of the so-called comforts of life, are not only not indispensable, but positive hindrances to the elevation of mankind.”

Students will be tasked with documenting and evaluating their own relationship to technology. If a field trip is possible, it would be wonderful to take students to Walden Pond and require them to spend 10 minutes observing the physical world around them, recording everything they see, hear, and smell. Allow them the opportunity to Be Thoreau.

Upon returning home, students will be asked to keep detailed records of their technology use. To that end, you could show students examples of the charts that Thoreau kept, which documented what he saw around Walden Pond. Ask students: *What can these charts tell us about Thoreau’s powers of observation? Why do you believe that Thoreau kept such detailed records? What is the value of a primary source like this both then and now? How might a document like this one be useful to starting a conversation about an issue or toward making a change? How did Thoreau’s observations compare to the ones you made during our visit?*

Recommendations for Assessing Student Learning:

- On the first day, have students keep track of their own technology use during a specific day. That includes: cell phone use (for calls, texting, social media surfing, etc.), computer use, or any other technology. Those observations should be documented on a chart, similar to the way Thoreau structured his records. The type of technology should be in the left column, and the minutes used should be in the right column. Students should bring this chart to class the following day.
- The next day: Students should reflect on the data. Ask your students: *What does the data show about your technology use? Were you surprised by anything when you look at the data? Does it raise any concerns for you? Did this technology use come at the expense of anything else? Was your technology use absolutely necessary?*
- Afterward, students should read Patton Oswalt’s essay “Why I Quit Twitter and Will Again” from *Time Magazine*, September 8-15, 2014.
- Here’s the challenge: require students to “disconnect” from technology for a day. Consider going 5 p.m. the first day to 5 p.m. the second day to allow them time to reflect and write that night after the experiment is done. Questions to consider in a written reflection include: *What was the experience of disconnecting like? Was it a positive or negative experience? Explain. Is it*

practical in today's world to totally disconnect from technology? Why or why not? Would you consider doing this again, even in a modified form? Why or why not?

- You could have students share their findings in small or large group discussion, along with a discussion of Oswald's essay. You could consider asking students to discuss how they believe Thoreau would respond.
- Show them the Wall Street journal report on Thoreau and Technology, available at <http://www.wsj.com/video/the-thoreau-technique-to-disconnecting-from-tech/C734BA47-9239-4C6A-A028-422EBA460FF4.html>, and discuss the video in class.

Lesson #3: The Soundtrack of your life: Taking A Cue from Thoreau

Curriculum Thread: Hearing that Different Drummer

Objective: The purpose of this lesson is to get students to consider their own individuality—their own drum beat.

Procedures, Materials, and Essential Questions: This lesson assumes that the students in the class are high school juniors, though any parameters could be established to adapt this lesson. Thoreau said in *Walden*: “If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away.”

To frame the lesson, have students read excerpts from the *Walden*, such as “Where I Loved and What I Lived For,” and “The Conclusion”. Take various passages from these selections to work with in class. Assign specific sections to small student work groups. Each group would then be tasked with pairing a song with that section, which they believe best captures the essence of the passage. Ask students to consider: *What do the passages say about Thoreau (his beliefs, values, or motivations)? What song best fits what you see in the passage; what “drummer” or song fits best? What is your rationale for your choice?* Students should be prepared to report out their choice and rationale in class.

Recommendations for Assessing Student Learning:

- Have students consider their high school career. They should identify **three** songs: the first should fit their freshman year; the second, their sophomore year; and the third should be a kind of goal setting, since this activity would most likely be done early in the year. Students should consider: *What song best fits or illustrates each year, considering the major moments that may have*

defined that year? Why did you select that song? Did you have more than one possible choice; if so, how did you eliminate one song over the other? What do you hope to achieve this year, reflected in the song you selected for junior year? Was it difficult to choose these songs? Why or why not?

- In addition to selecting the three songs--which students could actually record to play in class, students should be prepared to “curate” an exhibition of their songs. They should prepare text to share with “museum goers” (their classmates) that describes each song and its significance to that particular year. This text should be typed.

Lesson #4: A Little R & R: Be Thoreau While You Read—and Live

Curriculum Thread: Being Awake, Aware and Alive

Objective: The purpose of this lesson is *not* to give students a little rest and relaxation—as the phrase is traditionally used, but to make them more acutely aware of the world around them. by reading it and reflecting on it.

Procedures, Materials, and Essential Questions: The first “R” stands for *reading*; students will read various “texts,” which could include literary works, or discussions. The task will be to introduce students to the concept of journaling. Tell students that throughout his life, Henry David Thoreau kept 47 marble notebooks, which are currently housed at the Morgan Library in New York City. Thoreau would go on a nature walk, for instance, and record observations on a scrap of paper. After two or three days, he typically would transcribe those notes in longer form into his journal. Those journal entries reflected his thoughts and feelings on a variety of the day’s issues. The entries also served as the raw material for lectures he would deliver or essays he would publish. Journaling was central to the way Thoreau considered important issues and concepts.

Show students examples/images of Thoreau’s notebooks. Text of the notebooks is available at the Thoreau Institute’s website: walden.org. Very few examples of Thoreau’s field notes have survived, but one was displayed along with Thoreau’s walking stick and the journal entry derived from the notes during the joint exhibition by the Morgan Library and Concord Museum, “This Ever New Self: Thoreau and His Journal” The exhibit is currently on display in New York (until September 10) and will be at the Concord Museum beginning September 29, 2017 until January 21, 2018.

It is important to establish how Thoreau felt about writing and process itself. Thoreau gave a wonderful piece of writing advice to H.G.O. Blake in a letter dated November 16, 1857, which reflect his views of the purpose of journals. He said: “Going up there and being blown on is nothing. We never do much climbing while

we are there, but we eat our luncheon, etc., very much at home. It is after we get home that we really go over the mountain, if ever. What did the mountain say? What did the mountain do?"

In other words, we most often do not understand why something is meaningful until *after* some time and distance has passed. That's the second "R:" *reflection*. Thoreau argues, and you should get your students to understand, that it is our job to document *what* happens without worrying initially about *why it happened*. The important piece is that we revisit the event, reflect more upon it, and hopefully arrive at an understanding of it.

Recommendations for Assessing Student Learning:

- Have students purchase a marbled composition notebook. This is particularly fitting, given that Thoreau used similar marbled notebooks. You could share this information with them. These notebooks either could be stored in a classroom space, or students should be required to bring their notebook each day to class.
- Each day, students could take "fieldnotes" while they read or discuss in class on a handout. Students should consider: *What did I work on individually or with my classmates? What did I notice during class? What did I hear; what significant comments did my classmates make?*
- Those notes should be transcribed into the notebook, adding any new details that the writer recalls. The entries should be as detailed as possible, focusing in part on the big ideas observed during those days. Students should consider: *Am I describing things in enough detail so that someone who was not in our classroom would easily know what went on? Did I miss any important details that I can recall now, which may not be in my original notes?* Share this quote from Thoreau's journal: "It is a record of the mellow and ripe moments that I would keep. I would not preserve the husk of life, but the kernel." Students should therefore consider: *What were the important kernels of our work today, this week, etc.?*
- The student should select items upon which to reflect further. In his or her notebook, the student should connect the content from English class to something outside English class, possibly something he or she is studying in another subject that helps illuminate the subject matter. For instance, a student might connect a theory he or she learned about in psychology class to help better understand a character's motivation in an assigned text in English class. The entry explaining the connection should be a page long in the notebook. Students should ask: *What does this remind me of? What have I seen or heard which helps me to make sense of what I read or heard?* You may choose to grade some or all of the items in the composition notebook.
- Most importantly, though, students will then be required to use an entry to generate an essay, much like Thoreau did using his entries to generate lectures or essays. The essay should have a clear thesis showing how the

connection helps to enhance an understanding of the work or issue being examined and discussed.

Lesson #5: Thoreauvian values

Curriculum Thread: Choosing Life *with* Principle

Objective: The purpose of this lesson is to reinforce the core values espoused by my high school.

Procedures, Materials, and Essential Questions: Most schools establish core values to guide conduct at the school. This year at Lowell High School, students will be introduced to the following core values: Responsibility, Integrity, Determination, Engagement, and Respect.

What values guide your school community, consider introducing students to these concepts early in the year; that introduction might include an examination of the denotation and connotation of each word. You could create small groupings of students and ask them to consider one of the core values. Students could consider: *What does each word mean? What associations or judgments do we place on each word? Where are the words evident in our school? When have you seen examples of someone failing to live up to these core values?*

Thoreau wrote in his journal: “ Our true character silently underlies all our words and actions, as the granite underlies the other strata.” The core values (RIDER) are designed to serve as the bedrock of the LHS community and should thus be reflected in the conduct of its community members.

Recommendations for Assessing Student Learning:

- Students should read Jerome Lawrence’s play, **The Night Thoreau Spent in Jail*. (It should be noted for students that this play should NOT be read as entirely historically accurate, much like you would caution reading *The Crucible* as an historical account of the Salem Witch Trials). The play is short—only about 100 pages—and very manageable. Copies of the play are available at local booksellers; it is not available in pdf.
- Once students have read the play, they could write about or discuss the core values evident in the play. Students should ask: *Do I see any of the core values we emphasize at our school reflected in the play? Are other values explored in the play? How are those values reflected in the specific words and actions of the various characters, particularly Henry, in the play? What does the play tell us about acting morally?* Again, these answers could be written or shared orally, depending on your requirements.

Lesson #6: Be Thoreau and Avoid Shortcuts: Practicing Academic Integrity

Curriculum Thread: Choosing Life *with* Principle

Objective: The purpose of this lesson is to reinforce the idea that students must always practice academic honesty.

Procedures, Materials, and Essential Questions: For students, one of the most important values is integrity, particularly avoiding plagiarism. Not only has the advent of computers made information easier to access, but also it has made that information easier for students to “copy and paste.” One of the first concepts that students must understand is this: always credit the ideas of others.

Students should consider: *What does it mean to have integrity (particularly academic integrity)? Why is that so important?*

Take a handful of quotes from Thoreau and type them onto a sheet. Any quotes will suffice, but you should choose some that you consider to be most meaningful. A great resource would be the Dover Thrift Edition’s *Thoreau’s Book of Quotations*. A wonderful collection of quotations is available at the Thoreau Institute’s website at walden.org. I would recommend select 5 to 7 quotes. Since the quotations are grouped by subject matter, you could assign one for each different subject. First, divide your class into smaller groups. Those groups will then be tasked with paraphrasing each quote; the groups should put use fresh words while maintaining the same idea present in the quote. Students should ask themselves: *What does Thoreau mean?* The groups could compare paraphrases and discuss similarities and differences. The full class could discuss any successes or pitfalls. Also needing to be addressed will be the use of proper internal attribution (i.e. Thoreau writes, ...) when presenting ideas in writing.

Recommendations for Assessing Student Learning:

- Students should read Thoreau’s essay “Life Without Principle.”
- Students should write a detailed summary of the essay in which they state the main idea and key supporting details of the article. While most of the summary should be in fresh words, students should practice quoting a key line or two directly and integrating that properly in the paragraph. Students should consider: *What is Thoreau’s thesis? What key details does he use to support his thesis?*
- The following day, students should be prepared to discuss the following: *What does a principled life look like? What doesn’t it look like? What might Thoreau say about academic honesty? Why is academic integrity such a big deal? Why can plagiarism ruin your career or get you thrown out of college? Are people making much ado about nothing; is it really that serious? What is*

the difference between intentional and unintentional plagiarism? Can integrity be regained once it is lost? Is cheating ever justified? Who is really being cheated in the act of plagiarism?

- You could have students submit the typed summary after using it as a resource for the class discussion.

Lesson #7: Cutting the Clutter or Simplify, Simplify, Simplify!

Curriculum Thread: Practicing Simplicity

Objective: The purpose of this lesson is to help students convey their ideas with greater force and clarity.

Procedures, Materials, and Essential Questions: Thoreau famously said in *Walden*: “Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity! I say, let your affairs be as two or three, and not a hundred or a thousand; instead of a million count half a dozen, and keep your accounts on your thumb nail.” In discussing how to live life, Thoreau could easily have been talking about writing, too. Students should understand that Thoreau was a master of his craft; he considered himself foremost a writer and worked incredibly hard at writing. That included grappling with an idea and how it was presented until he felt that he got it “right.”

Students can learn a couple of important writing lessons from Thoreau. First, it should be noted that the first statement of something is not always the best one, and that writing needs to be revisited and reshaped; the value of revision should be a crucial concept to convey to students. One of the best resources to illustrate Thoreau’s process—the evolution of an idea—comes from Jeff Cramer’s handout on the “different drummer” statement that appears in *Walden*. Cramer traced the advent of the ideas in that statement to a journal entry some 14 years before the publication of *Walden*, through 6 additional iterations of the concept. Seeing this will give students a clear idea of an author at work: someone reflecting upon and refining an important idea until he felt that he got it right. It could be used to help frame an overall focus on revising student writing.

Students should be introduced to “tired words and phrases” that could be removed from their writing. A wonderful list appears in Bruce Ballenger’s *The Curious Researcher*, along with an exercise that gives students practice at cutting the clutter. Another idea that could be addressed is the issue of “overwriting” or attempting to sound “sophisticated” by littering writing with big words when simpler ones would suffice. It would be interesting to show student examples of Thoreau’s own process of taking the journal and turning them into essays or lectures; in the early journals, Thoreau literally cut out important entries in his journals to fashion into his larger, more polished works.

Recommendations for Assessing Student Learning:

- To make this the most authentic, students should revisit a piece of their own writing: perhaps it is the essay that grew out of one of the journal reflections, or perhaps it is another piece completed during the year. Regardless, students should work with their own writing, as the work toward refining statements and cutting wordiness from their writing. They should consider: *Is this the best way to say what I want to say? Am I missing anything that my reader needs? Am I digressing from my point; is there material I should remove from my essay?*
- Students should submit both the original piece and the revised one, along with a brief explanation of the changes made between the two pieces.

Lesson #8: What Would Henry Do? Applying the Concept of Civil Disobedience to Another Literary Work

Thread: Hearing the Different Drummer

Objective: To apply the lessons of Thoreau, particularly “Civil Disobedience” to the novel, *Ready Player One*.

Procedures, Materials, and Essential Questions: In Ernest Cline’s novel *Ready Player One*, America is falling apart and reality has been replaced by a virtual reality. Most Americans spend their days in the OASIS a virtual reality simulation. Juniors at Lowell High School entering the American Studies class were assigned to read *Ready Player One* over the summer and will be prepared to discuss it. A good way to begin is to have students consider: *What kind of person is protagonist Wade Watts? What makes him different than other people in the book?*

To begin in would be interesting to have students read Thoreau’s “Civil Disobedience.” They should consider the following: *Is protagonist Wade Watts practicing Civil Disobedience in the book? What idea is he fighting against? How does he combat it? Is he justified in his opposition to that idea? Why don’t others take a stand before him? Are the masses fighting out of selfish or noble reasons?*

Students will then read “Where I Live and What I Lived For” from *Walden*. In addition to discussing the essay, it would be good to draw connections between Walden Pond and OASIS. Have students discuss: *How is OASIS their Walden? What do the people get out of OASIS? What are some of the drawbacks of living in OASIS? What are some of the benefits? Are the inhabitants of OASIS living “deliberately?” How does place in the novel affect what the characters value and do?*

You should obtain a free classroom license for the video game, *Walden: A Game*, which students could use in the classroom. Go to waldengame.com and request a

classroom license for a link to use. Students should be given an opportunity to play the game only after reading *Walden*.

Recommendations for Assessing Student Learning:

- Student learning can largely be assessed through small and large group discussions of the various questions listed above.
- Additionally, have students respond in writing to the following prompt:
*On its webpage, the creators of the game write: It is not our hope that the game would ever replace reading the book of Walden, or taking a lovely walk out doors, or getting closer to nature in any way. **We hope the game is actually a path for more people to find their way back to Thoreau, and to nature, and to be inspired to think more deliberately about the choices they make about life and how to live it simply and wisely.***

In your opinion, can the game—or any game for that matter—achieve these things? Why or why not? Is it a simple or complicated issue? Be sure to explain your opinion drawing on examples from both the video game itself and Ready Player One, which essentially centers on a video game.