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Writing as a Way of Being Awake, Aware, and Alive: NEH Landmarks-Inspired Lesson Plans for Bringing Thoreau Into a “Writing as a Daily Practice” Elective

*Note: I teach creative writing and literature at an educational resource center for young women who are pregnant or parenting and who are working towards their high school equivalency degree. I am preparing to teach an elective in the fall that focuses on writing as a daily practice and encourages students to build a pleasurable, personal relationship with the act of writing. Our classes are structured in a way that accommodates rolling admissions year-round and that allows students to do all their work in class (i.e. no homework is assigned). Evaluation in my electives comes in the form of written or oral comments to students on their work.*

**Day One: Introduction to Henry David Thoreau and to Journaling as a Practice**

*Objectives:*

- Students will customize the journals they’ll be using for the rest of the course
- We’ll discuss the idea of writing as a daily practice
- They’ll learn a little about Henry David Thoreau and his journal keeping.

*Essential Questions:*

- Why might you keep a journal? What feels important in your life to record or reflect upon?
- What does it mean to think of a journal as a *practice*?
- How does private writing affect your writing and thinking in a more social sense?

*Materials:*

- Blank books for students to use as journals
- Set of pens for journaling use
- Markers/glue/scissors/collage materials for cover decorating
- Copy of Thoreau’s excerpted *Journal* to show students
- Jeff Cramer handout on the evolution of Thoreau’s “different drummer” passage in *Walden*

*Rough Schedule:*

- 1 - 1:10: Warm-up: have students ever kept a journal? When, and what did you write down? Everyone shares their answers aloud.
- 1:10 – 1:25: Introduction to Thoreau. Read or watch a short biographical intro, then introduce Thoreau’s journal-keeping to students (perhaps with photos from the Morgan Library). Listen to an excerpt from the Morgan Library’s online exhibit; show students Jeff Cramer’s handout and discuss. How did Thoreau use his journal to try things out as a writer?
- 1:25 – 1:50: Look at different definitions of the word “practice.” (Students can use dictionaries or volunteer common-knowledge). Journal writing time in response to the following prompt: *There is a saying that goes, “What you practice is what you become.” What do you practice daily? Does this speak to who you want to be? Why or why not?*

- 1:50 – 2:15: Journal decorating and clean-up time.

*Learning Assessment:*

- Students can elect to receive feedback from me (“open-journal”) or to simply visually demonstrate that they are using the journal (“closed-journal”).

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**Day Two: Journaling as a Way to Notice More**

*Objectives:*

- Students will begin to consider what impact an environment may have on one’s thinking, and vice versa
- We’ll introduce the concepts of close observation and reflection
- We’ll think about nature writing as a genre and what it offers us as readers and writers
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*Essential Questions:*

- What does it mean to you to closely observe your surroundings? What tools do you use to do so, and what challenges do you face?
- What do we gain from noticing small things about what’s around us?
- How can we use the physical or external world to understand ourselves?

*Materials:*

- Student journals
- Set of pens for journaling use
- *Journal* excerpts to share
- Close noticing handouts

*Rough Schedule:*

- 1 - 1:20: Drive to Arcadia Wildlife Sanctuary.
- 1:20 – 1:25: Reading aloud of one or two excerpts from Thoreau’s *Journal*.
- 1:25 - 1:45: Independent exploration and writing based on one of two handouts: sensory prompts or object-specific description (or free exploratory writing).
- 1:45-1:55: Reconvene and writing in response to two short prompts: 1) *After spending some time quietly noticing the outside world, what do you notice about your own feelings and mental state?* 2) *How would this process have been the same if you had been at the Care Center? Where would you like to try this experiment?*
- 1:55 - 2:15: Return to the Care Center by van.

*Learning Assessment:*

- Students who want to share their written or verbal reflections will have an opportunity to do so.
- Students can elect to receive feedback from me (“open-journal”) or to simply visually demonstrate that they are using the journal (“closed-journal”).

## Day Three: Living and Writing Deliberately/Journal as Experiment

### *Objectives:*

- Students will directly engage with Thoreau's work during a close reading exercise
- We'll explore some of the varieties and styles of journal keeping and consider our own writing practice(s)
- We'll continue to think about *practice* as we discuss journals' role as observatory and laboratory, using Thoreau as an example

### *Essential Questions:*

- What might it mean to live deliberately? How does writing help and/or hinder us in that endeavor?
- Why did Thoreau go to Walden, and why did he write a book about it?
- How does the form of a diary interact with its content? What does it do to decide on one form, and what does it do to shape it?
- How might writing and science use similar techniques or procedures? What goals might they share, and how are the practices different?

### *Materials:*

- Student journals
- Set of pens for journaling use
- Markers/glue/scissors/collage materials
- Copies and/or photos of various diaries, including Lynda Barry's books
- Thoreau handout with passages from *Walden*

### *Rough Schedule:*

- 1 - 1:10: Warm-up: what does it mean to do something deliberately? What is something you try to do deliberately? Students share out answers.
- 1:10 – 1:35: Introduction to Thoreau's time at Walden—sketch of his project and examination of excerpts. Writing prompt: *Do you want to live deliberately? What would that look like to you? What does it mean to you to "really live"?* Time for sharing.
- 1:35 – 1:55: Show students different examples of journals and artist books. What decisions or inclinations help shape the form of a journal? Show examples of Thoreau's phonological charts. Discussion: how might a journal be a kind of lab? How does this connect to what we just read in *Walden*?
- 1:55 – 2:15: Try an experiment in your own journal (prompts will be available for students who need help getting started.) Freewriting/artmaking and clean-up time.

### *Learning Assessment:*

- At the start of next class, we'll revisit the concepts of deliberateness and experiment, and discuss how the ideas operate together.
- Students can elect to receive feedback from me ("open-journal") or to simply visually demonstrate that they are using the journal ("closed-journal").