

Living and Writing Deliberately: The Concord Landscapes and Legacy of Henry Thoreau

Curriculum Thread: Living in Society

Learning Intention (objective):

Students will use their understanding of mid-nineteenth century U.S. History, particularly the themes of anti-slavery reform, transcendentalism, and westward expansion related to the Mexican-American War, to analyze Henry David Thoreau's essay "Civil Disobedience" and discuss in a seminar format important ideas and themes in an effort to further explore and answer a student generated question.

Essential Questions:

How are Thoreau's views reflective of American society in the decades leading up to the Civil War?

What parts of Thoreau's essay reflect ideas and themes of transcendentalism and other reform movements of the time?

How can Thoreau's ideas on civil disobedience be connected to similar examples of political protest either before or after the 1840s?

Procedure:

Students will be given two days to read H. D. Thoreau's essay "Civil Disobedience" and develop a "cosmic question" for the class to discuss in a seminar format. (A "cosmic question" is a question developed by the student that they would like to ask a very wise person who is familiar with the reading and has an understanding of the historical background of the time in which the piece was created.)

On the day of the seminar, the desks will be organized in a circle so all students can see and hear one another easily.

Each student will take turns reading his or her "cosmic question" to the class. (I often have students email me their question in advance, so I can compile them electronically and have them visible for the class to see and refer to. However, the teacher/students can write each question down by hand, but this takes more time.)

Then students will decide which question they want to focus on and begin the seminar. (The purpose of the seminar is to explore the reading and the meaning it has to the participants. Students should refer back to the reading as much as possible to help them address and,

hopefully, answer the “cosmic question.” It should be a cooperative exercise where students build off one another’s ideas in a positive and non-competitive manner.)

Once the class has selected the question for the seminar, the student who created the question has the first opportunity to discuss his/her ideas about the question. Once the student has spoken, it is no longer that student’s question but the entire classes question whose job it is to explore and answer it as well as they can. (This should be emphasized to the class)

The teacher’s job once the seminar has begun is to facilitate the discussion and make sure that the students are working toward answering the question they chose. It is not to lead and contribute to the discussion. There will probably be some moments of awkward silence, but that is part of the process and will encourage students to think and contribute to the seminar.

At the end of the class, the teacher will ask the students to reflect on their experience and write a response (one paragraph minimum) to the “cosmic question” for homework.

Materials:

A copy of “Civil Disobedience” for the students to read.

A computer with projection unit or large paper, markers, and tape to write down cosmic questions for students to see and discuss while determining which question to focus on in the seminar.

Success Criteria (assessment):

Students can actively participate in a thoughtful seminar using specific examples from the essay as well as prior knowledge about U.S. History to work cooperatively and address a question they developed and find interesting/relevant.

Students can reflect on the seminar experience and express in writing what they learned and found valuable from the activity.