

Be Awake, Be Aware, Be Alive
Introducing Henry David Thoreau and His World to Second Grade Students

Susan Richardson, Media Specialist
Sunnyside Elementary School
Red Wing, Minnesota

"The youth gets together his materials to build a bridge to the moon or perchance a palace or temple on the earth and at length the middle-aged man concludes to build a wood shed with them." Although the literal words of Henry David Thoreau are meant for adults, the ideas they express about nature and walking, about observing and writing, are easily understood and appreciated by children. Even the youngest will respond positively to a mentor like Thoreau who encourages a reverence for nature and the art of living a simple life.

The following lessons are designed to introduce second graders to Thoreau and his world. Each lesson centers on a piece of literature. Although the lessons were created for use in a library curriculum, delivered in fifty minute segments once a week, they could easily be adapted for general classroom use with slightly younger or older students. Some lessons involve extended activities to be completed beyond the time frame of the library session.

The interdisciplinary nature of library curriculum allows librarians to address a variety of academic standards. These lessons address **standards in English/Language Arts, Social Studies and Media Literacy**. Those specific standards are listed in Appendix A.

Appendix B provides an **annotated bibliography** including titles used in these lessons and supplementary titles which might also be helpful.

Note that the use of a **document camera** when sharing the stories suggested for these lesson plans will allow students to observe and discuss the details of the illustrations most effectively.

Framing Questions and Topics to Investigate

Who was Henry David Thoreau? When and where did he live?

Why did he choose to move to the woods?

What did he discover about nature from his careful observations?

How did writing in his journals help him understand more about the world he lived in?

What did he mean by "living deliberately"?

Assessment of student learning in short lessons such as these primarily involves observation of students' understanding of concepts as evidenced in participation in large and small group discussions, noted on an anecdotal record sheet. More in depth assessment might take place in one-to-one conferencing about journals and responses created in Lessons 2 and 3, although the rotation schedule of library classes and the sheer number of students seen throughout a day makes this challenging. Coordination with a classroom teacher is often needed to assess library media products.

Lesson 1: An Introduction to Thoreau and His World

Share *Henry Builds a Cabin* by D.B. Johnson. This fictionalized story of the details of how Henry makes decisions about how, where and why he will build his cabin in the woods will introduce students to Thoreau and the world in which he lived. A wealth of questions, activities, and brief videos related to the book can be found on the excellent website “The Adventures of a Cyberbee” created by Linda Joseph, specifically at <http://www.cyberbee.com/henrybuilds/>.

The details in the illustrations of the book provide a means to introduce students to many facts of Thoreau’s life:

--The pencil inscribed “John Thoreau & Sons”—Thoreau’s family owns a pencil factory and Thoreau himself made several improvements to the pencils produced there.

--The bean fields which provided Thoreau with the money he needed to live, but which also allowed him to observe wildlife, and to imagine the Indians who had first used the same land.

--The way in which Thoreau used the surroundings of his cabin for living: the sunny spot for reading, the bean field as his dining room, the path to the pond as a place to play his flute, and therefore needed but a small dwelling.

--The friends who visit him and who play an important role in his life: Ralph Waldo and Lydian Emerson, Bronson Alcott.

A slideshow of pictures of the site of the house (taken by this author during the NEH seminar) will link this fictionalized story to its real setting in present day Concord.

Activity: Using the measurements described in the book, have students measure a large piece of paper to construct a “life-sized” floor plan of Thoreau’s cabin, 10 x 15 feet. Using the list of furniture and other items he moves into his cabin (found in an illustration in the book), have students use real objects (or in the case of the bed, a facsimile) to place on the floor plan. Compare the cabin and its furnishings to the homes in which they live. Introduce the idea that Thoreau went to the woods “to live deliberately” and to discover what is actually necessary for a happy life. Discuss what it means to “simplify”.

Lesson 2: Observing Nature Carefully: Thoreau’s Life at Walden Pond

Review the idea of living deliberately and simply, introduced at the end of Lesson 1.

Before reading this lesson’s book, share its book trailer, created by Macmillan Books, to set the stage for today’s story: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-O-ts1Ec0tA>

Share *If You Spent a Day with Thoreau at Walden Pond*, by Robert Burleigh, illustrated by Wendell Minor. (with thanks to Nancy Logghe from the 2017 NEH Thoreau seminar for suggesting this title)

Discuss which ideas or facts about Thoreau from *Henry Builds a Cabin* were also described in this story.

As a group, make a list of the activities suggested in this book in which Thoreau might engage as he seeks to “live deliberately”. All will involve close observation of nature using all of one’s senses: feeling the soft pine needles, listening to the birds, savoring the huckleberries, spying the baby partridges.

Note that Thoreau kept a journal in which he carefully records his observations.

A slide show of places photographed during a walk around Walden Pond (taken by this author during the NEH seminar) will again link this fictionalized story to its real setting in the present day.

Activity: Bring the class to a green space near the classroom. Any outdoor area will work. Give each student pencil and paper. Instruct the students to find a single natural object to observe—a flower, a tree, a blade of grass, a rock, the sky. Give them 10 minutes to write down every detail of the object. Encourage them to consider all five senses. This exercise involves lengthy, deliberate, careful observation, and while many may announce they are finished long before the time is up, encourage

them to “look, look, and look again.” Ask them to imagine what this object might say about itself if it could speak. If time permits, have them sketch the object, or if equipment is available, photograph the objects they have observed.

One possible use for their notes might be to create a book that other classes could use as a guide to the green space and to observing nature closely, in the same way that Thoreau’s journals inspire adult readers today. Collaboration with a computer teacher may coordinate such a project.

Note: Thoreau visited Red Wing, Minnesota in June 1861 and climbed Barn Bluff, noting in his journals the various flora and fauna he observed. For teachers whose schools are in the vicinity of Red Wing, a hike on the bluff during which students could observe and write in journals would make an excellent extension for this lesson. Specific details of his observations can be found in “The Significance of Thoreau’s Trip to the Upper Mississippi in 1861” by Harriet M. Sweetland, published in the *Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters*, Volume 51, 1962, p. 276.

(<http://images.library.wisc.edu/WI/EFacs/transactions/WT1962/reference/wi.wt1962.hmsweetland.pdf>)

Lesson 3: Thoreau Inspires Others

Introduce *Louisa May and Mr. Thoreau’s Flute* by Julie Dunlap and Marybeth Lorbiecki, illustrated by Mary Azarian, by playing a recording of flute music from Thoreau’s music books (sheet music source listed in bibliography, mp3 downloads available). Previous lessons have alluded to Thoreau’s music, but in this lesson, his flute playing takes center stage as metaphor for the inner creative voice in all of us. If possible, show copies of the music scores, in which imprints of the leaves Thoreau collected and pressed as he played and walked can be seen.

Share the story. Thoreau often “collects” the children of Concord to explore the countryside. One young girl, Louisa, is particularly drawn to these rambles, both because of her curious nature and feisty adventurous bent, and because Thoreau is such an unusual character.

Questions for discussion:

Have any of Thoreau’s activities in this story been described in the previous stories about him? We are coming to know his personality and interests very well. How does this book add to what we know about him--especially his physical appearance?

Describe Louisa, who grows up to be the author of a much beloved book, *Little Women*, based on her own family. How does Thoreau help her find her inner voice, and what kind of voice is it?

Thoreau inspires Louisa to write her first poem, included in the illustrations on the last page of the book.

Listen to a musical version of the poem at this website:

<https://louisamayalcottismypassion.com/tag/louisa-may-mr-thoreaus-flute/>

Activity: Louisa responds to Thoreau’s ideas through her inner voice of creative writing--she creates a poem. Ask students to respond to what they have learned about Thoreau by using their inner voices. Their response might be through artwork, of any medium. It might be through words--poetry or prose. It might be through music or dance. It might be through creating a replica of Thoreau’s house in the woods, perhaps involving a more scientific voice. It might be a collage of items from nature.

Limitations of time for a library session will mean that students may only have a chance to begin to plan their responses at this point. Creation of their responses may take place back in the classroom, as a related project during art or music classes, or in a future library lesson.

Appendix A

The following are standards from English/Language Arts, Social Studies and Media Literacy which are addressed in the lessons on Thoreau and his world.

Academic Standards in English/Language Arts for Grade 2

Reading Literature (2.1)

Analyze how and why individuals, events, and ideas develop and interact over the course of a text.

2.1.3.3 Describe how characters in a story respond to major events and challenges.

Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

2.1.7.7 Use information gained from the illustrations and words in a print or digital text to demonstrate understanding of its characters, setting, or plot.

Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.

2.1.9.9 Compare and contrast two or more versions of the same story.

Academic Standards in Social Studies

From the National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies: The Themes of Social Studies.

Time, Continuity and Change

Children in early grades learn to locate themselves in time and space. They gain experience with sequencing to establish a sense of order and time, and begin to understand the historical concepts that give meaning to the events that they study. The use of stories about the past can help children develop their understanding of ethical and moral issues as they learn about important events and developments. Children begin to recognize that stories can be told in different ways, and that individuals may hold divergent views about events in the past. They learn to offer explanations for why views differ, and thus develop the ability to defend interpretations based on evidence from multiple sources. They begin to understand the linkages between human decisions and consequences.

People, Places, and Environments

In the early grades, young learners draw upon immediate personal experiences in their neighborhoods, towns and cities, and states, as well as peoples and places distant and unfamiliar, to explore geographic concepts and skills. They learn to use maps, globes, and other geographic tools. They also express interest in and concern for the use and misuse of the physical environment.

Production, Distribution and Consumption

In schools, this theme typically appears in units and courses dealing with concepts, principles, and issues drawn from the discipline of economics. Young learners begin by prioritizing their economic wants vs. needs. They explore economic decision-making as they compare their own economic experiences with those of others and consider the wider consequences of those decisions on groups, communities, the nation, and beyond.

Academic Standards in Media Literacy for Grade 2

Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

2.8.2.2 Recount or describe key ideas or details from a text read aloud or information presented orally or through other media.

Communicate using traditional or digital multimedia formats and digital writing and publishing for a specific purpose.

2.8.8.8 With prompting and support, create an individual or shared multimedia work for a specific purpose (e.g. to create or integrate knowledge, to share experiences or information, to persuade, to entertain, or as an artistic expression).

Appendix B

Burleigh, Robert. *If You Spent a Day with Thoreau at Walden Pond*. New York: Henry Holt, 2012.

In this lovely picture book, Robert Burleigh and Wendell Minor imagine a special day spent with the celebrated writer and naturalist through the eyes of a child. Together Thoreau and the young boy watch small but significant wonders such as swimming fish, fighting ants, and clouds in the sky. It is a day full of splendor and appreciation of the outdoor world.

Dunlap, Julie, and Marybeth Lorbiecki. *Louisa May and Mr. Thoreau's Flute*. New York: Dial, 2002.

In nineteenth-century Concord, Massachusetts, seven-year-old Louisa May Alcott joins other local children on the varied excursions led by teacher and naturalist Henry David Thoreau, and is inspired to write her first poem.

Johnson, D.B. *Henry Builds a Cabin*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2002.

Young Henry appears frugal to his friends as he sets about building a cabin. Includes biographical information about Henry Thoreau.

Henry Climbs a Mountain. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2003.

Although he loves his freedom, Henry, a bear modeled on Henry Thoreau, goes to jail rather than go against his principles. Based on an incident in the life of Henry David Thoreau.

Henry Hikes to Fitchburg. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000.

While his friend works hard to earn the train fare to Fitchburg, Henry walks the thirty miles through woods and fields, enjoying nature and the time to think great thoughts. Story inspired by a passage in Henry David Thoreau's "Walden".

Henry Works. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2004.

On a misty morning, Henry, a bear modeled after Henry David Thoreau, shows his awareness of nature as he helps neighbors during his walk to work.

Przybojewski, Donna Marie. *Henry David Thoreau, Who Can He Be? Read and Find Out—Easy as A, B, C*. Streamline Publishing, 2016. Engaging and vibrant illustrations walk children through the A, B, C's with simple rhyme as they learn about this American author.

Schnur, Steven, editor. *Henry David's House*. Watertown, MA: Charlesbridge, 2002.

Excerpts from Thoreau's Walden highlight his belief in the inherent value of living life in harmony with nature.

The Thoreau Family Flute Book. Merrimack, NH: Falls House Press.

Music played in informal concerts probably by Henry Thoreau, his brother John and their father who all played the flute. This book has ten easy to intermediate level pieces transcribed from the original flute books displayed at the Concord Museum in Massachusetts.

Downloads of recordings from this book available at

<https://www.amazon.com/Thoreau-Family-Flute-Book/dp/B01I3OYPBY>