Introduction

Henry David Thoreau had a profound impact on his contemporaries in 19th century New England. He challenged his readers and listeners to examine their lives, choices and processes. His message connects with readers still today.

The Industrial Revolution impacted and influenced the common person in the ways of consumerism and commerce like in no other time in world history. Thoreau pleaded for simplicity.

When humanity was stripped from a majority of individuals the way that the Earth was being stripped of her natural resources, Thoreau begged for ethical treatment of all.

Did this happen by accident?
Does Thoreau have anything to teach us today?

The following unit makes the teachings of a man who was in tune with the problems, issues and challenges of his time a century and a half ago meaningful to elementary-aged students today.

Place, People, Purpose

Would Henry David Thoreau been the person he was had he not been born in Concord, Massachusetts in 1817? What if he had never met the Alcotts, Ralph Waldo Emerson or John Brown? How much of Walden was influenced by Thoreau’s experiences?

The fact is that we are all probably a combination of the places we know, the people we experience and the times in which we live. The following units allow the student to learn about themselves so that they may make their own footprint on the world in which they live.
Thread 1: Being awake, aware and alive

**Focusing Questions:** What did you notice about yourself today? How can you use nature to help you to realize the best version of yourself?

**Focusing Quotes:** “Heaven is under our feet as well as over our heads.”, “The West of which I speak is but another name for the Wild; and what I have been preparing to say is, that in Wildness is the preservation of the world.”

**Colorado Academic Standards (CAS):** CCSS:W.5.3a; W.5.3d; Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening standards that include

**Colorado Essential Skills:**
1. Appropriately express one’s own emotions, thoughts, and values and identify how they influence behavior. (Personal Skills, Self-Awareness) supporting a point of view with facts and details and being
2. Critical writers develop narratives that convey sensory images

Lesson 1: Finding Your Center

Students will know and be able to understand how environmental stimuli affect their state of mind as measured by heart rate.

**Step One:** Teach students how to measure their resting heart rate by placing the index and middle finger against the carotid artery at the side of the neck, counting the number of beats in ten seconds and multiplying by six.

**Step Two:** Show students first minute of distracting video

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lc9UO10QbeM

while having them perform difficult math problems that have high stakes consequences (i.e. test grade). The last ten seconds have students measure their heart rate as above.

**Step Three:** Discuss how our bodies are adapted to respond to our environment to keep us safe. This fight or flight has kept human beings safe for millennia and you can see how, by pumping oxygen-rich blood to our muscles, that we can better respond to a threat.

**Step Four:** In a very calming voice explain that we can use our minds to control fight or flight responses like heart rate. Show video of tranquil scene

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OdIJ2x3nxzQ

and focus on breathing deeply in through our noses and out through our mouths. Have students take their pulse during the last ten seconds of this exercise.

**Step Five:** Ask students to share how the experiences were the same (Typical responses were that they were the same length of time, they watched a video, heart rate was measured, etc.) and how they were different (first one was stressful, second one made me feel calm, etc.).
Ask them how they felt they would do if asked to take a test after the activity in Step 4. Better or worse? Wouldn’t it be great if we could get to the place we were in Step 4 anytime we wanted? Good News! We can!

**Lesson 2: Where is Your Walden?**

Students will answer personality profile questions to help them understand that likes and dislikes make us who we are. We tend to gravitate toward the things that we like and are good at and in most cases there is a location where we can be our best self. I usually have students “vote with their body” by moving to one side of the room or another. These are fun “get to know you” questions and don’t have a right or wrong. Use several of these, or make your own, to help break the ice before completing the writing prompts.

1. Are you more of a dog or cat person?
2. On a scale of 1 - 10, how much do you love pizza?
3. On a scale of 1 - 10, do you like rollercoasters?
4. Are you more likely to go to the beach or the mountains?
5. Are you more likely to read a book or play a board game?
6. Zero to one stuffed animal or more than 10? 20?
7. Favorite season of the year (four corners). Talk to the people at your corner. Is your reason why the same as theirs?
8. Only child? LOTS of siblings? Talk to the person next to you. What is one thing you enjoy and one thing you wish you could change about your situation?
9. On a scale of 1 - 10, how sure are you of what you want to be when you grow up?
10. Are you more likely to take a walk, ride your bike, play on the playground, etc. by yourself or with other people?

Now that students have had an opportunity to move, feel a part of a group, feel unique and hopefully laugh a little bit, have them plan a journal entry. You can have students plan anyway you choose but I like to have students trace their hand the way a young child would make a turkey. Then, students write one phrase on each finger that answers the prompt. The phrase doesn’t need to have correct grammar, capitalization, etc., but should serve as a reminder of an idea that they may wish to develop.
Our prompt is simply, “Where is your Walden?”. Think of a time that you were both awake and aware of the moment but so at peace and relaxed that you lost track of time? Using your senses, describe where you were, what you were doing and who (if anyone) you were with. What was it about that moment that if you could freeze it would be worth saving? This is the Walden that you should be writing about.

This lesson may be split into two days depending on time allotted

Lesson 3: Making Recycled Paper
Students will use their background knowledge of the importance of recycling to appreciate the paper they will create their new journal with.

Step One: Create a class K/W/L/W chart
Step Two: Interview the school’s custodian and find out how effective the school’s recycling efforts are in keeping school materials out of the landfill. What works well? What needs to be looked at? Add to K/W/L/W
Step Three: Read recycling articles in small groups or partners. Add to K/W/L/W
Step Four: Make recycled paper as outlined below: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RR_218EtLJU
Step Five: Use recycled paper to publish final copies of Lesson 2 or Lesson 4.

Lesson 4: Connecting With Nature (optional)
We are extremely fortunate to be an hour away from Rocky Mountain National Park and traditionally take a three day trip exploring the geology, ecology and biology of the Park with all of our students. While not all schools can do a trip like this, all communities have places where its residents can recharge by connecting with nature.

Step One: Take many, many pictures on our trip to RMNP. Take pictures of LOTS of different things and not just that one chipmunk that was so cute or my friend eating lunch.
Step Two: Select one picture that really speaks to you…the one where you can remember every detail about the scene in the photo and makes you feel relaxed and at peace.
Step Three: Write as much as possible in four minutes that describes the picture. Do not worry about handwriting or complete sentences. This quick write is just to get the student back to the place where they took the picture.
Step Four: Select two or three words, phrases or ideas that bring you back to that time and place.
**Step Five:** Expand ONE of the items you selected above. Describe it in such detail that we could match the picture to the writing even if they were separated. Is this your Walden? How does it make you feel when you read what you have written?