

Within and Without: Living in and out of Society with Henry David Thoreau

Overview

How do some of the ideas presented to readers by Henry David Thoreau in a variety of his works enable readers to think more deeply and clearly about their own place and role in their community and society? Can the words of Thoreau help students to think about their own actions and the degree to which what they do *personally* might impact what happens *collectively*?

Guiding Questions

How does an individual live and thrive in a society?

What is the “exchange” in a community? i.e. What do *you* for *it*—what does *it* do for *you*?

How can improving *yourself* improve the group/community/society?

Learning Objectives

Examine multiple texts written by Henry David Thoreau including “Slavery in Massachusetts,” “Civil Disobedience,” “Life Without Principle,” and “A Plea for Captain John Brown.”

Create a system for exploring Thoreau’s ideas and the ideas of self and peers.

Use Thoreau’s works to examine personal relations to community and society.

Subjects & Topic

Grade levels

8-12

Class Periods

3-5

College and Career Readiness Standards

N/A

Preparation

Required texts: “Civil Disobedience,” “Slavery in Massachusetts,” “Life Without Principle,” “A Plea for Captain John Brown,” selections from *Walden*. Students should read these pieces (teacher discretion for *Walden*), and any necessary discussions should ensue.

Lesson Activities

Activity One: Dialogic notebook

Students should use a physical notebook to create a “dialogic notebook.” This is formed by opening the notebook to facing pages, and folding each side in half vertically, in essence creating four columns.

Column 1 (far left) is used for student to copy one or more passages from the reading directly. These passages can be assigned by teacher “find a passage where Thoreau comments on ‘principle’.” Or more abstractly: “choose a passage from pages x through y that you think are important to Thoreau.” Multiple passages can be used as well: “compare a passage from x with a passage from y.” The options are unlimited.

Column 2 (middle left) is where the student discusses *something* (anything!) about each passage transcribed in column 1. Whatever may strike the student’s fancy.

Column 3 (middle right) is the place for a PARTNER (notebooks should be passed...) to write a comment on BOTH columns for each passage. Each comment should end with a question directed back to the original student.

Column 4 (far right) is a place for summative thoughts from the owner of the notebook (notebook should be returned...) that are expansive and attempt to connect ALL the comments made in columns 1-3. Hopefully, a richer understanding has occurred by connecting both the thoughts of the student and the ideas of the partner.

***On the metacognitive level, teachers may or may not wish to discuss that this activity (which can be repeated *ad infinitum*) is a physical manifestation of the overall lesson goal: an individual student writes his/her thoughts to Thoreau’s writing which is then examined in conversation with the “community” (a peer) and subject to possible transformation. This is a direct example of how the individual operates and grows (or resists!) within a community.

Activity Two: In-Class Writing Prompt; follow-up discussion

This is a two-class period activity:

Period 1 (writing): Students should be asked to write on the following prompt: What is *your* act of civil disobedience? Why? What *can* you do? Students should be encouraged to think of this in a broad sense: civil disobedience could be an action such as a protest or boycott, but it could also be activism in the sense of education. In short, students should note the ISSUE

stimulating the disobedience, the ACTION they would be willing to take, and WHY this action would be taken for that issue.

Period 2 (discussion): Students should be encouraged to share their work—both their issue and their actions. Ultimately, in the spirit of Thoreau, teachers should ask “would you be willing to be jailed for this?” This discussion should also address the question of how the personal becomes public—how does improving yourself improve the group/community/society?

Assessment

“Why Am I So Angry...And What Can I do About It?”

It is possible that you are a malcontent—that just about everything in life bothers you or creates a problem for you in some way. But rather than simply being a malcontent, preparing a thoughtful argument about something you hate may be a better way of understanding the thing that bothers you while also possibly helping you to find a solution to this problem. What if you could persuade those who do have power to change the thing you hate? What if those who hate classes starting at 8:25AM could convince the people who schedule things like 8:25AM classes that 8:25AM classes shouldn't exist, not because students hate them, but because they do not fulfill the mission of the school that schedules 8:25Am classes? Tackling a problem that shows itself in your own day-to-day life is your next writing-related problem. Something is not as it should be, and you wish it were different.

AUDIENCE: You're writing for someone who has the power to make the change you seek.

PURPOSE: You want to persuade. But remember, this is not the persuasion of a mall child throwing a tantrum until the authority figure gives in. You need to convince your audience that this change is in *everyone's* best interest, not just your own.

PROCESS:

1. *Feel the hate.* Let loose all the dislike you feel about anything school related. Visualize your day. What are the problems? What could be better? Write down everything you can think of, no matter how trivial it might seem, but try to focus on policies and procedures rather than individuals. You're supposed to be in school to learn things and prepare for the future you desire. What stands in the way between you and learning?
2. *Find your focus.* From your list, pick an item that seems important to you that also might impact others. It should be something that, if you can solve it, will have a positive impact on the school (or beyond).
3. *Consider your audience choices.* What are all the different groups that are affected by this problem? List them. There will be many. We call these people “stakeholders.” Which one seems both persuadable and able to make change? This is your audience.
4. *Analyze your audience.* Which decision maker(s) are you going to write to? Why have you chosen them? Consider your audience's needs, attitudes, and knowledge regarding your subject.

5. *Make your case that a problem exists.* Write an argument that describes and illustrates the problem to the best of your ability without relying on any additional sources. This is only based on your experience, but remember what you know about your audience. What can you say that will persuade them to agree with you that this is a problem worthy of their attention? You are not complaining. While you are working, feel free to feel your feelings and vent to anyone who will listen, but remember that, in the end, that venting is a pressure release, not an effective method of persuading an audience to take action to help solve the problem.
6. *Improve your case.* What additional information and research will help improve your argument that this is a problem? What do you need to prove to your audience to be convincing, and what kind of proof do you need to find? Are your sources convincing and authoritative? Maybe you've got a good case, but for a different audience than you first settled on. Should you switch audiences? Maybe you should seek out some test audiences to see how you're doing.
7. *Create a solution.* As you research your problem, you will likely also find information on possible solutions. You probably have a few ideas of your own as well. What would be a good solution to this issue? How will you convince your audience that it's a good solution?
8. *Draft, revise, edit.* Now that you've done all this thinking, planning, and research, write a solution to this problem targeted toward your specific audience. Revision will likely happen even as you draft and your thinking clarifies.
9. *Title.* A title will be especially important here. One technique to consider may be the use of a title and subtitle where the title introduces the subject but primarily functions to interest the reader, and the subtitle clarifies the specific purpose of the piece: "It's Too Early to Learn: The Importance of Sleep in Academic Achievement."

Lesson Extensions

Based upon time and student interest, ask students to investigate contemporary acts of civil disobedience. Again, encourage students to think laterally—does civil disobedience REQUIRE arrest? There are plenty of examples. Groups Black Lives Matter and Antifa are routinely arrested for their actions. So, too, with right wing groups exercising their rights to free speech and assembly often in the face of contemporary societal norms. But groups fighting gun violence or violence against women such as Moms Demand Action and #metoo could also be described as civil disobedience. The list is long and can be engaging and empowering for students to investigate and report back to the class upon.