Title: Mohandas K. Gandhi and the Written Word

Lesson By:  
Shara Carder  
Collins Elementary School,  
Cupertino, California  

Grade Level: 3  
Subject Area: Language Arts  
Duration of Lesson:  
60 Minutes, 5-8 days  

Content Standards:  
English Language Arts Content Standards for California Public Schools  
Grade 3  
2.0 Reading Comprehension  
2.3 Demonstrate Comprehension by identifying answers in the text.  
2.0 Writing Applications  
2.2 Write descriptions that use concrete sensory details to present and support unified impressions of people, places, things, or experiences.  

Lesson Abstract:  
Students will explore the early life of Mohandas Gandhi, focusing upon his desire to serve his community by writing newspaper articles. They will read letters written to an actual newspaper, and one letter written by Gandhi to the Natal Advertiser. This will help them to gain an understanding of how writing an article can be a form of nonviolent resistance to oppression.  

Guiding Questions:  
1. Why was Gandhi motivated to read newspapers and later write newspaper articles?  
2. Which of Gandhi’s values were reflected in this pursuit?  
3. How did Gandhi use these articles to project a positive image of the Indian people?  
4. What might you need to include when writing a letter about an important issue to a newspaper?  

Content Essay  

Introduction  
Mohandas K. Gandhi, known throughout India as Mahatma (or great soul), has intimately touched the lives of individuals throughout the world. He can be credited with many great accomplishments. As a young lawyer, living in South Africa in the late 19th century, he emerged as a shrewd activist. He helped the Indian population living in South Africa unify and use nonviolent forms of resistance against European oppression. In 1930, he led the famous Salt March, walking over 240 miles to the seaside as a protest against the British salt tax. Once at the sea, Gandhi led a
large-scale disobedience, violating British laws, and making salt from seawater. Millions of Indians were motivated to follow suit.

Many wonderful books and articles have been written, shedding light upon those formative experiences that prepared Gandhi to achieve profound feats. One example is *Gandhi Pioneer of Nonviolent Social Change* by Tara Sethia. I am indebted to Sethia’s book for many of the ideas in this essay. In the scope of this essay, I wish to consider Gandhi’s early life and the emergence of a set of unique and seminal values. In addition, I wish to track Gandhi’s growing understanding of how to use the newspaper, as a tool of communication, and as an instrument of nonviolence.

**Early Life**

Gandhi was born in 1869 in western India. At that time, India was ruled by Great Britain. A portion of the country fell under direct British rule, while the states referred to as “Princely India” were under indirect British rule. His family was quite well off, as his father, Karamchand, served as a diwan, or prime minister in three princely states, including; Porbandar, Rajkot, and Wankaner. Karamchand was an astute administrator, highly effective in mediating between the local citizens and the British administrators. Perhaps Gandhi internalized some of these negotiating skills as he exhibited extremely effective negotiation with the British throughout his adult life.

Throughout his childhood, Gandhi was drawn to truth telling as a positive personality trait. He valued his father’s honesty. He also liked to reflect upon the story of King Harishchandra, who spoke the truth even at the cost of losing his family and his kingdom.

Gandhi was exposed to several values in his childhood, which may have led to the development of his unique conception of ahimsa or nonviolence, which came to fruition in his later life. All members of his family were vegetarians because they followed the teachings of the Hindu god Vishnu. Perhaps learning to treat animals kindly helped him to begin thinking about the ethical treatment of humans as well. Gandhi had direct experiences with forgiveness. Specifically, he stole one time as a child in order to repay a family debt. He then wrote a note to his father confessing his mistake. Karamchand tore up the note and forgave his son for stealing. This experience of being treated with love and forgiveness for making a mistake had a lasting effect on Gandhi. Forgiveness would later become one important component of non-violent resistance.

**England**

In 1888, Gandhi sailed to England to study law. He had hoped to join one of the few “Inns of Court” or professional organizations for training judges in London. In addition to career advancement, Gandhi was exposed to new ideas and concepts. He was exposed to newspapers and he made a habit of reading them daily.

Gandhi upheld his lifestyle choice to be a vegetarian when he first arrived in London out of deference to his family. After some time, he discovered a good vegetarian restaurant. There, he found Henry Salt’s pamphlet, “A Plea for Vegetarianism.” This writing had a profound impact upon him, as it influenced him to become a vegetarian by choice rather than out of duty.

During Gandhi’s stay in England, he published nine articles in *The Vegetarian*, a weekly newspaper that was connected to the London Vegetarian Society. His articles
contained information to enlighten the English about the true nature of vegetarianism in India. In the first article, he reveals to the English that the popular belief that all Indians are vegetarians is untrue. In reality, only members of two Hindu casts, the Brahmins and the Vaishyas, are pure vegetarians. Here, for the first time, Gandhi shows that he understands that the printed word can be used to give the British an accurate understanding of a custom, or belief system followed by the Indian population.

Throughout his stay in England, Gandhi was a dedicated and successful law student. He was “called to the Bar in 1891” (Sethia 32).

South Africa

In 1893, Gandhi arrived in South Africa, having accepted a position to work as a legal aid on a civil suit. On his first day of work, he was taken to the Durban Court. The magistrate ordered him to remove his pugri (turban) but he refused. In South Africa, the Indian population endured many oppressive policies such this one. The next day, Gandhi read an article in the Natal Advertiser in which he was criticized for his action. The incident, and the subsequent article was one of Gandhi’s first direct experiences of racial prejudice. Gandhi wrote a short response in the same paper, standing up for his decision. He wrote, “To appear uncovered before a gentleman is not to respect him” (CWMG-V1:57).

This response is similar to Gandhi’s first article in the Vegetarian as he uses writing to educate non-Indian culture about an Indian custom or cultural tradition. It differs from the article because it is the first instance of Gandhi standing up for his native culture in and environment where Indians were being oppressed. Gandhi was developing the understanding that print could be used to gain respect within the Indian business community, and to help the community struggle against individual injustices placed upon it by the white South Africans.

For the next several months, Gandhi developed a deep understanding of Indian immigration to South Africa in the mid 19th century. He discovered that there were two types of Indian immigrants; indentured laborers, who were recruited to work on coffee, tea, and sugar plantations, and free Indians who purchased land and operated retail stores. The whites treated the free Indians poorly, denying them the right to vote, and restricting trade opportunities, because the free Indians competed with the whites in business.

In September of 1893, he wrote a letter in the Natal Advertiser to a South African governmental official in response to an editorial stating that the South African Indians or “Asiatics” were unfit to live in Natal. Gandhi wrote, “It seems, on the whole, that their simplicity, their total abstinence from intoxicants, their peaceful and above all, their businesslike and frugal habits, which should serve as a recommendation are really at the bottom of all this contempt and hatred of the poor Indian traders” (CWMG-V1:59-60). Having a deep knowledge of the Indian community, and the history of their oppression, Gandhi called upon the dominant white society to reflect upon their own ethics. By writing the article, he displayed the ability to represent the grievances of the entire Indian business community, using print as a nonviolent form of defense.

Gandhi’s use of the printed word underwent one more final development in 1903. He was the central catalyst for the launching of the Indian Opinion. This newspaper was started by Gandhi and the National Indian Congress in order to oppose racial discrimination. In Gandhi’s eyes, the publishing of the newspaper was an act of service,
and providing service to the community was one of Gandhi’s life goals. When Gandhi was unable to raise funds to continue to publish the newspaper, he moved the entire office and press to Phoenix. He established a communal settlement called the Phoenix Farm, where profits from growing crops would help sustain the community and the paper. Gandhi now understood that the written word was such a crucial tool in advancing his non-violent platform.

Bibliography:


Materials Needed:
5-10 Copies of a Newspaper that contains a letter or editorial
1 copy of Mohandas’ Gandhi’s letter for each student. (See appendix A.)

Teaching Activities

Activity 1: Use the content essay to present a short lecture about the early life of Mohandas Gandhi. Describe Gandhi’s habit of writing articles and editorials to describe and justify Indian customs. Explore a local newspaper edition such as the San Jose Mercury News. Find the letters to the newspaper, or letters to the editor. Discuss why someone might want to write a letter to the newspaper.

Activity 2: Describe Gandhi’s experience visiting the Durban Court in 1893. Have a discussion about why Gandhi refused to remove his turban. Read Gandhi’s letter to the *Natal Advertiser* written on May 26th, 1893. (See Appendix A). The students will refer to the letter to answer the following questions:

1. One day after Gandhi appeared in court in South Africa, a citizen wrote an article
in the *Natal Advertiser* with the headline, “An Unwelcome Visitor” *(CWMG-V1:57).* Why do you think that Gandhi was described in this way?

2. Why did Gandhi write a letter to the *Natal Advertiser* on May 26\textsuperscript{th}, 1893?

3. Why didn’t Gandhi remove his turban after entering the Durban Court?

Activity 3: Make an outline of the specific facts and events that Gandhi described in his *Natal Advertiser* article. Be sure to include as many concrete details as possible. Use this outline for the assignment in activity 4.

Activity 4: Discuss some of the problems occurring in your school and/or local community. Make a list of these problems. Each student will choose a problem and write a letter to a local newspaper concerning it. Prior to writing the letter, they will construct an outline of the facts and events that they will include. Refer to the outline in activity 3 as an example.
Appendix A: Letter to "The Natal Advertiser" (26-5-1893)

Durban,
May 26, 1893
To The Editor,
The Natal Advertiser

Sir,

I was startled to read a paragraph in your today's issue referring to myself, under the heading, "An Unwelcome Visitor". I am very sorry if His Worship the Magistrate looked at me with disapproval. It is true that on entering the Court I neither removed my head-dress nor salaamed, but in so doing I had not the slightest idea that I was offending His Worship, or meaning any disrespect to the Court. Just as it is a mark of respect amongst the Europeans to take off their hats, in like manner it is in Indians to retain one's head-dress. To appear uncovered before a gentleman is not to respect him. In England, on attending drawing-room meetings and evening parties, Indians always keep the head-dress, and the English ladies and gentlemen generally seem to appreciate the regard which we show thereby. In High Courts in India those Indian advocates who have not discarded their native head-dress invariably keep it on.

As to bowing, or salaaming as you would call it, I again followed the rule observed in the Bombay High Court. If an advocate enters the Court after the judge has taken his seat on the bench he does not bow, but all the advocates rise up when the judge enters the Court, and keep standing until the judge has taken his seat. Accordingly, yesterday when His Worship entered the Court I rose up, and took my seat only after His Worship had done so.

The paragraph seems to convey also that though I was told privately not to keep my seat at the horseshoe, I nevertheless "returned to the horseshoe". The truth is that I was taken by the chief clerk to the interpreters' room, and was asked not to take my seat at the horseshoe the next time I came unless I produced my credentials. To make assurance doubly sure I asked the chief clerk if I could retain my seat for the day, and he very kindly said "yes". I was therefore really surprised to be told again in open court that in order to be entitled to the seat I had to produce credentials, etc.

Lastly, I beg His Worship's pardon if he was offended at what he considered to be my rudeness, which was the result of ignorance and quite unintentional.

I hope, in fairness, you will extend me the favour of finding the above explanation a space in your paper, as the paragraph, if unexplained, would be likely to do me harm.

I am, etc.,

M. K. Gandhi