Ahimsa Center K-12 Lesson Plan

The Satyagraha Training of Social Activists in the Classroom

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Grade Level/ Subject Areas:
Middle School History/Humanities

Duration of Lesson:
A Yearlong Dedication

Content Standards:
Core Knowledge History and Geography, Grade 8
- The Decline of European Colonialism
- The Vietnam War and the Rise of Social Activism

Lesson Abstract:
Within this lesson, students will use video, biographies, as well as Gandhi’s own writing to recognize the need for social activism to begin as an introspective act. Students will then turn inwards to create change within themselves. Every individual has power over his or her own life, so beginning the journey of nonviolent change on an individual level allows for a more effective and empowering result.

Guiding Questions:
- How did Gandhi’s pursuit toward Truth increase his effectiveness as an agent for social change?
- Could educational opportunities related to self-empowerment and self-transformation have a meaningful impact on students?

Content Essay
Mohandas Gandhi is regarded as one of the most inspirational leaders in human history. A tireless proponent of civil rights and democracy, he is best known for his work first in South Africa fighting against racism, and then in India as he led a movement that resulted in the country’s freedom from British imperialism. Perhaps what is most impressive about his story is that these ends were arrived at with the use of nonviolent means. In the face of one of the most dominating countries in the world, he preached that true freedom and lasting independence could only come by using peaceful methodologies. As this is contrary to what is taught in contemporary Western society, this essay will introduce how students might come to understand his commitment to ahimsa, or nonviolence.

To Gandhi, when working toward a goal, the means one takes are just as important as the ends reached. Using violence to create peace was counterintuitive to him. In Hind Swaraj, he used an analogy to illustrate: “If I want to deprive you of your watch, I shall certainly have to fight for it;
if I want to buy your watch, I shall have to pay you for it; and, if I want it as a gift, I shall have to plead for it; and, according to the means I employ, the watch is either stolen property, my own property, or a donation. Thus we see three different results from three different means. Will you still say that means do not matter?” (Gandhi, 2009, p. 80) He felt that nonviolent methods were the only way to instill necessary values in a society so that when freedom from tyranny was achieved, a more just and peaceful existence could be actualized. As he said, “We who seek justice will have to do justice to others.” (Gandhi, 2009, p. 17)

Of course, this proved to be a daunting task. Indian independence was gained only after a lifetime of learning on the part of Gandhi. He treated his life as a training ground; in fact, he named his autobiography The Story of My Experiments with Truth. He dedicated his life to the pursuit of Truth, which he considered to be God. In a slightly different way, he described God as being “the soul in absolute perfection”. In order to find God, an individual must pursue Truth. And the way to pursue Truth is to look inward and improve the quality of the soul, defined by Gandhi as dharma (2009, p. lxi).

In this way, swaraj (self-rule) for the country of India was dependent upon the swaraj of each Indian. As determined by Gandhi’s teachings of the philosophies and strategies of satyagraha (insistence on seeking the truth), this work was the individual’s responsibility that comes along with the individual rights. The role of each satyagrahi was to transform herself on an individual level, so that the civilization of India could therefore be transformed. The life of an individual became the model and the center of the societal structure.

This transformation of Indian civilization was very important in the eyes of Gandhi. In Hind Swaraj, he warns of the threats of “modern civilization”. It was not the British that posed the problem for India, or even colonialism. He believed that modern civilization was the culprit, and to avoid the pitfalls of modernity, individuals would need to find within themselves what they would like to see in their country. Gandhi’s definition of civilization was “that mode of conduct which points out to man the path of duty” (2009, p. xxx). Taking this perspective, the actions of the individual become the basis for society. Because Indians were firm in their desire for a peaceful and democratic society, Gandhi insisted that its members act in a peaceful and democratic way. This included, then, a peaceful and democratic acquisition of freedom from British imperial rule.

While easy to understand, these Gandhian concepts are very difficult to enact into one’s life. Gandhi himself took decades to arrive at these philosophies, and won freedom for India only after a lifetime of satyagraha. Looking at his life, however, helps us to understand that his achievements began on a much smaller scale. Gandhi came to understand that inner changes within a person ought to be the starting point of outer changes in society. He found strength in identifying the link between inner life and outer achievement; in fact, they fall along a continuum (hs, lxxiv). When attempting to create change, he felt strongly that the first steps taken should be towards internal growth. Only after personal transformation has taken place should societal transformation be attempted.

Gandhi spent the major part of his life working to achieve Indian independence from Britain. This swaraj, and the subsequent creation of a disciplined and harmonious society after Indian
freedom was granted, were the goals toward which he tirelessly worked. As educators for sustainability and social justice, the goals that we have for our students are very different. We also face different roadblocks on our journey with our classes.

The challenges of service learning and social action within a classroom has always been to find meaningful work that match the passions shared by students. Often, students identify large, complex issues but feel incapable of making any amount of significant progress towards a solution. In other situations, students fail to find meaningful opportunities where impact could be felt by their work.

Gandhi’s lessons show us that these roadblocks could be avoided if students first began to look within themselves when considering opportunities for transformation. By no means is he suggesting that by doing this we are “starting small”, as would many leaders in the activist movement would recommend. Personal reflection and self-transformation are oftentimes the most difficult of practices. The creation of opportunities for individual swaraj in our classrooms, however, would offer a number of benefits to students hoping to eventually make meaningful change in their communities.

By directing the pursuance of self-discipline and self-transcendence in our students, we create a space where they can build important skills that can later be implemented in community building and transformation. The patience needed to spend time thoughtfully looking inward, for example, will also be valuable when encountering issues with others in the community. The same can be said for the actual skills practiced while reflecting on events, opinions, decisions, and relationships. And as Gandhi explains, reflection is akin to morality building. “To observe morality is to attain mastery over our mind and our passions. So doing, we know ourselves.” (2009, p. 65)

Opening the eyes of students to their own beliefs, strengths, and passions will also allow for much greater awareness of issues that should be addressed on a societal level. Gandhi’s prescription of personal swaraj will open minds and hearts to the pressing issues about which the students are passionate. It becomes an invaluable opportunity for the exploration of issues classes can later plan to impact with their new set of skills.

Perhaps most importantly, a practice of individual swaraj will empower students. The identification of meaningful change is a very powerful motivator for us. It is very easy for students to get discouraged when, after months of work, no noticeable impact can be seen. Personal reflection and mindfulness, though, can allow for identifiable results, which empower students and stimulate them to continue along the continuum of action.

The lessons found herein are designed to help students reflect meaningfully on their own lives and to consider values and ideas important to them. These realizations can then be converted into opportunities for social engagement on a community level.

References
Teaching Activities/ Materials Needed:

It is a human tendency to identify problems existing in the world. Modern media wastes no time dramatizing and sensationalizing societal ills. It is also a human tendency to look elsewhere to find the roots of these problems. This act creates a pitfall in the problem solving process however, as most individuals have very little influence and control over such external and distant situations. As a result, many people feel frustrated, helpless, and unable to work towards meaningful change. The following is a list meant to trigger ideas and directions that teachers may take classes over the course of a school year.

The key to initial student buy-in is the harnessing of the motivation, emotion and energy already found in students. My experience has been that, after two rounds of Current Event reports, for example, young people are hungry to make an impact. Using the examples of Gandhi and Chavez, as well as countless others, who have initiated change by first looking inward, teachers will be able to inspire students to begin this difficult work.

Film:
*Frontier Gandhi: A Torch for Peace*
This film will provide an opportunity for students to learn about another life dedicated to nonviolence. It is important that young people are exposed to more than just two immortalized heroes doing this work. This film will show a “less famous” example of leading a life of peace.

*A Force More Powerful*
This documentary would serve as a wonderful introduction to the many examples of nonviolent power being used around the world. It may help to alleviate some of the opinions, results of the dominant social paradigm, that nonviolence cannot be used as a meaningful agent of change.

*The Global Oneness Project*
This website is a treasure trove of films that educate and inspire. I strongly recommend that all teachers peruse these archives. Screenings of pieces from this nonprofit can even be organized for the public!

Books:
*The Four Agreements: A Practical Guide to Personal Freedom*, by Don Miguel Ruiz
These four guidelines can be used in classrooms as the established rules, as goals made by students, or even as homework assignments that can be gradually incorporated into daily practices. The book is written in a way that is accessible to middle school readers, and is perhaps the most valuable tool on this list.

*Caring: A Feminist Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* by Nell Noddings
This text is included as a resource for educators to use as they help students to embark on this important journey.
**Gandhi: Pioneer of Nonviolent Social Change** by Tara Sethia
Dr. Sethia’s biography offers specific, well-presented examples of Gandhi struggling to develop his personal philosophy of personal swaraj. Sharing the more human aspects of Gandhi, particularly his mistakes and weaknesses, remind students that these great men “started small”.

**Other Ideas:**
National Public Radio’s *This I Believe* essay program
As students are exposed to the importance of self-reflection and personal exploration, this program will be an invaluable tool in helping young people to formulate a clearer sense of self. Essays are archived on the website, and are also read by authors. Some have been written by celebrities. Some essays are funny; some are emotional. All are powerful.

Vipassana meditation with children
I plan to bring in an expert in Vipassana meditation to work with my students this academic year. Starting simply, young people will have the uncommon opportunity to stop and listen to their own systems.

A day of intentional silence
After completing some of the initial work related to self-discovery, it might be a valuable experience for students to consider the importance of taking a vow. A day of silence is a way that an “everyday” person can find power to make an impact in the world. Selecting a cause, committing to a vow of silence, and educating others are all meaningful activities with important lessons for young people.

A monthly or weekly guest speaker series in the classroom
Lesson plans from the Southern Poverty Law Center: [http://www.splcenter.org/](http://www.splcenter.org/)
Lesson plans from the Zinn Education Project: [http://zinnedproject.org/](http://zinnedproject.org/)
Lesson plans from Training for Change: [http://www.trainingforchange.org/nonviolent_action_sword_that_heals](http://www.trainingforchange.org/nonviolent_action_sword_that_heals)