Title: Building Character Through Conflict

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Grade Level and Subject Area: Grade 8 English Language Arts

Duration of Lesson: 2-5 class periods; 45 minutes each

Relevant Standards from Massachusetts 2011 ELA Curriculum Frameworks:

CC.8.RL.2: Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text, including its relationship to the characters, setting, and plot; provide an objective summary of the text.

CC.8.RL.3: Analyze how particular lines of dialogue or incidents in a story or drama propel the action, reveal aspects of a character, or provoke a decision.

Lesson Abstract: This lesson asks ELA teachers to reframe the way we teach the concept of conflict to focus on the personal growth that can accompany well-addressed conflict. Students are asked to consider conflict in a less black-and-white, one-winner/one-loser way than our society typically portrays conflict, and they are given the opportunity to develop this understanding within the stories we read, as well as in their own lives.

Guiding Questions:
- What is character? How does it come to be/how do we build it?
- What are different ways to approach conflict?
- Why are stories so often centered on conflict? What do we stand to learn from these?
- How did Gandhi understand and approach conflict and its resolution?
- How can heroes—in this case, Mohandas Gandhi—help us better understand conflict in both literature and our own lives?

Important Vocabulary:

**Conflict**: the meeting of opposing forces (person vs. person; person vs. self; person vs. nature; person vs. society; person vs. fate/God); an opportunity for growth.

**Internal Conflict**: conflict within a character, person vs. self

**External Conflict**: conflict between a character and something or someone outside of the self

**Climax**: the moment we know “who wins”—character A, character B, or both
**Dynamic Character:** a character who undergoes some essential change through a story

**Static Character:** a character who basically stays the same throughout a story

**Swaraj:** self-rule and freedom (literally of the self or individual, which leads to political swaraj of the community or society, and to poorna swaraj, freedom for all through self-rule)

**Satyagraha:** firmness in adhering to and seeking the truth; also called “soul force” or “truth force”

**Sarvodaya:** well-being of all

**Ahimsa:** nonviolence (internal and external) in practice and principle

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**Content Essay:**

We English teachers often say that there is no story without conflict, and it is true. A conflict-free “slice of life” is enjoyable to some degree, but the stories that hold readers, that keep us up past bedtime, that we learn from and relate to, tend to revolve around conflict. Looking at Gandhi’s idea of *ahimsa*, nonviolence within and beyond the self, we might wonder, “Must it be so? Must we be so centered on conflict?” I suggest that we do continue our focus on conflict but reframe the way we look at its resolution: instead of teaching *climax* as “the moment when we can see ‘who will win’ the conflict,” we could offer an alternative that seeks to challenge the paradigm of winner-loser by offering a third option, win-win. Thus we are continuing to see stories as they are, and at the same time we are strengthening our emphasis on conflict resolution and can point to and highlight the benefits to one’s character of this process.

In a way, we are hypocrites: at the same time we are teaching our students that there is no story without conflict and are celebrating story and working to get them excited about stories, we are asking them to avoid conflict in their own lives (especially in our classrooms). Our students might take us and the stories we assign more seriously if we engage them in the question of when to avoid conflict versus when to confront and resolve it. An examination of the ways by which we and others have faced conflict and come through to the other side can help us understand human nature and the nature of conflict. It also helps us see what, ironically, we stand to gain through experiences with conflict, especially if we don’t “win” over someone else. By reframing the negative “baggage” that accompanies the term “conflict” in our lives, we can see conflict as an opportunity for positive growth (an “experiment with truth”) rather than just a pain. We might consider the following “equation” to transform our idea of conflict: conflict = problem = puzzle. By tackling the puzzle of conflict, we become better equipped to do such solving.

Study of the ideas and experiences of Mohandas Gandhi and other nonviolent heroes can help teachers more fully understand the ideas we are trying to communicate and how to bring those ideas into study of literature as well as our lives. As our society values both winning and heroes so highly, we can use heroes’ nonviolent experiences to demonstrate to students the ultimate productivity of revising our understanding of conflict and of winning.
Mohandas K. Gandhi (1869-1948) embodies the idea of nonviolence, or *ahimsa*. We must not confuse *ahimsa* with avoidance or lack of conflict, however; it is in moments of conflict when we see the strength of nonviolence as a response. Gandhi grew up in a fairly affluent family in Rajkot, western India. As a boy, he began to develop the values of truth and equity. In *Gandhi: Pioneer of Nonviolent Social Change*, Dr. Tara Sethia relays an experience of twelve-year-old Gandhi’s that demonstrates his early commitment to truth. In order to impress a government inspector, Gandhi’s teacher encouraged Gandhi to cheat on a spelling test. He refused (14). Gandhi continued his quest to maintain truth in his daily life as he grew up, and he eventually attended law school in England and returned home. From there, he took a job in South Africa, which, like India, was a British colony. It was a difficult place to be non-European, and Gandhi got into many conflicts with the government and with individuals who represented systematic injustice, so he had many opportunities to develop and practice his approach to conflict. He called such opportunities “experiments with truth” (Gandhi, *Autobiography* 55).

An early example of this is when, after being in the country for less than a week, Gandhi was physically forced out of a first-class train compartment despite his having a ticket. His first response was to seek revenge against those who threw him out, but he held back and considered. Next, he wanted to return to India, to avoid the problem. Finally, he realized that these two responses to the conflict would not solve anything in a substantive way; instead he chose to address the root injustice that caused the altercation. This launched him on a campaign of over twenty years to bring justice for the Indian community in South Africa. Following this, he devoted the rest of his life to seeking justice and freedom for Indians in India.

What were Gandhi’s methods in this truth-seeking, and what do his experiences reveal about his character? We need to remember that Gandhi did develop as a person; he was not born as the enlightened being we may associate with his name. He made mistakes, but he claimed them, learned from them, and applied the lessons to his life. It is also important to remember that, while we think of him as a symbol of peace, his life was full of conflict; that’s how his nonviolent theories and practices were refined, articulated, and demonstrated. Gandhi even created conflict situations in order to draw attention to and get at the larger, structural conflicts. Keeping these things in mind will help us and our students retain the perspective that we can make mistakes, and not spend energy thinking about how badly we’ve failed, but rather attend to how the experience will help us grow. In relating this to literature, we may use the terms “dynamic character” and “static character.” As opposed to static (non-changing) characters, dynamic characters experience a fundamental change through the story, typically related to a conflict. These are often the most compelling characters, whose experiences we learn the most from.

Core principles guiding Gandhi’s philosophies and actions were *satyagraha*, *ahimsa*, *swaraj*, and *sarvodaya*. *Satyagraha* is firmness in adhering to and seeking the truth; it is also called “soul force” or “truth force.” One moment we see this is in his decision to stay in South Africa after learning that truth, or justice, was being denied there. Another example is his fasts, which he undertook in part to find clarity within himself and in part as a message to others: “At a political level, undertaking a fast for Gandhi, especially a fast unto death, was the ultimate form of satyagraha. Gandhi used fasts to appeal to people’s conscience and to bring about a positive transformation among them. In this sense, fasts served as a means of communication with masses as the ‘language of the
heart’” (Sethia 216). Throughout his life, Gandhi’s dedication to truth determined where he was geographically and guided what projects he was working on.


Ahimsa is nonviolence of the spirit and body. It guides everything an ahimsaka (practitioner of ahimsa) does and thinks. This includes not wanting anyone to “lose,” and thus does not see conflict resolution through a win-lose lens; it also entails focusing on the unjust deed and the system behind that deed rather than the injustice-doer, and on cultivating compassion and empathy for all. In the nonviolence of spirit, we see that conflict and climax look different for Gandhi: he wanted everyone to “win.” Neither side was evil; one just may be temporarily unable to see the truth. Even the British withdrawal from India was a win-win situation as he saw it. Sethia explains ahimsa:

> In one aspect, ahimsa is the ability “to love the meanest of creations as oneself.” This aspect of nonviolence is rooted in self-purification, in acts of compassion and justice. In its other aspect, ahimsa means rejection of violence and refraining from it, which may require self-suffering and self-control. Ahimsa as compassion, love and justice, was Gandhi’s ideal (92).

We see Gandhi practicing ahimsa countless times in his life as a means of effecting swaraj (self-rule and freedom). His famous Salt March of 1930 is a good example; by walking for 24 days and 241 miles toward the sea, where he and others would symbolically break the salt laws by gathering salt from the sea, Gandhi showed Indians and British the determination of the oppressed. He did not avoid conflict here; indeed, he created a situation full of conflict to draw attention to the larger conflict. He also focused the Indian population and gained critical support for his movement’s methods for seeking swaraj.

Swaraj (self-rule and freedom) must begin with the individual (“One drowning man will never save another”) and can then radiate outward into one’s community and world (Gandhi, Hind Swaraj 71). Gandhi stressed the idea that political swaraj was not the same thing as decolonization, for simply escorting the British out without also rejecting any unjust values and systems they had imported was as good as having the British stay. The ultimate goal that we seek through swaraj, ahimsa, and satyagraha, Gandhi said, was the well-being of all, including the most oppressed people, the environment, animals—all. This is sarvodaya.

Grown from the boy who stole from his brother and the man who tried to throw his wife out of the house after a disagreement (both Gandhi), the man who made such strides in Indian morality and politics developed greatly as a person. Surely he could have gone many other directions when confronted with the conflicts he met in his life, but he chose the route we now see as history. He chose to see conflict in a collaborative way, with ahimsa. Through his trials, he became and showed himself to be a loving, committed, patient person.

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1 In Hind Swaraj, Gandhi famously illustrates this concept with a metaphor: “In effect [ejecting the British yet rebuilding their systems as our own—navy, army, etc.] means this: that we want the English rule without the Englishman. You want the tiger’s nature, but not the tiger; that is to say, you want to make India English, and, when it becomes English, it will be called not Hindustan but Englistan. This is not the Swaraj that I want” (27).
How does this impact the way we teach conflict in English class and approach it in our own lives? As suggested above, we might consider adding a third option in looking at the literary term *climax*, that of a no-lose resolution. We also could benefit from appreciating the conflicts more, not as the specific situations they are, but as representations of larger differences or problems, for now we (and the characters in the stories we read) have an opportunity to address the situations and make change. We and the stories’ characters are presented with an experiment. With truth. How we react, what kind of scientist we are in this experiment—this develops and shows our own character. Can we develop more compassion and empathy? Can we find more creative ways to reframe and resolve conflict? If so, this would be an amazing gift to be able to offer our students and ourselves.

**Bibliography:**


**Teaching Activities:**

☐ This lesson can work with any literature that we read with our students. Some that I will consider pairing with this lesson are:
- *The House on Mango Street*, by Sandra Cisneros
- “Thank You, Ma’m,” by Langston Hughes
- “If,” by Rudyard Kipling
- *The Outsiders* by S. E. Hinton
- *Stargirl*, by Jerry Spinelli
- *Animal Farm*, by George Orwell

☐ Questions to consider:

☐ Project ideas:
  - Write advice letters to characters with ideas of how they could try to resolve their conflict for a “win-win” solution.
  - Explore conflict resolution and communication strategies. What kinds work for you? Write a skit demonstrating each. Experiment with them in real life.
  - Be trained in mediation skills.
  - Write a lab report about one of your “experiments with truth.”
  - Rewrite the end of a story to show an alternate conflict resolution.
  - Write about a conflict from different points of view.
  - Read about the same current event in a number of news sources, including international press. Do they all portray the conflict in the same light?
o Analyze protest songs. What are the conflicts being expressed? How are the speakers trying to resolve them? Is song a viable solution?
o Invite as guest speakers or interview people who deal with conflict as their profession, such as law enforcement officers, counselors, psychologists, vice principals, etc. How do they view conflict? How do they productively facilitate conflict resolution? What do they have to say about character building?
o Interview someone who you think resolves conflict very well. What are his or her secrets? What qualities of character does he or she think are built by confronting conflict?
o Watch documentary I Am.
o Listen to or read a number of “This I Believe” stories from thisibelieve.org. How many of them deal with conflict? How many of them show character building? Write your own “This I Believe” essay.
o Write about one of your most important values and how you realized it was so important to you.

Materials:
Some activities will need no materials. Others may benefit from:
o Chosen texts
o Computers for research and composition
o Television and copy of documentary

Digital Story:
“Building Character Through Conflict”