Ahimsa Center K-12 Lesson Plan

Title: Can One Have Rights Without Responsibilities?

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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.SL.1: Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 8 topics, texts, and issues, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly.

CC.8.SL.4: Present claims and findings, emphasizing salient points in a focused, coherent manner with relevant evidence, sound valid reasoning, and well-chosen details; use appropriate eye contact, adequate volume, and clear pronunciation.

Lesson Abstract: In this lesson, students learn the basics of Mohandas Gandhi’s concepts of community and the role of the individual in community. They also explore in depth the relationship between privileges, or rights, and responsibilities, or duties. Students reflect on, discuss, and test their own understanding and feelings about these ideas within themselves and in their communities.

Guiding Questions:
- How do Gandhi’s life and philosophies illustrate the concepts of dharma, swaraj, satyagraha, sarvodaya, and ahimsa, and what place do those ideas have in our lives?
- What is the relationship between rights and responsibilities, for Gandhi and for us as individuals and communities?
- What is our role as individuals within a community?

Important Vocabulary of Gandhian Concepts:

Dharma: duty, guided by morals and ethics
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
Content Essay:

Picture Gandhi: many of us have a clear image in our minds of a thin, older man dressed in a plain, white loincloth, smiling under his wide moustache and round glasses. In this image, bolstered by whatever scattered knowledge we have of his life and philosophies, he seems saintly and unexpectedly strong. Even on paper, he radiates a gentle, loving energy.

Now re-picture him: he is twenty-four, clothed in a fine British suit, and enthusiastic about his new role in the legal system of South Africa. He is on his way to tackle his first big case and has boarded the overnight train to travel northwest from coastal Durban to inland Pretoria. He takes his seat in a first-class compartment and is ready. The year is 1893, and young Gandhi is about to be offered a transformative lesson, one that he will accept and that many will gain from.

Mohondas Karamchand Gandhi grew up in Rajkot, India, and his family was wealthy enough to have servants and to send the children to school and college. Through some financial maneuvering, Mohandas was also able to attend law school for three years in England. While college and graduate education is common in our era, it was a rarity in the late 19th century in India, reserved for the moneyed classes and an impossibility for the vast majority of the population. Indeed, Mohandas was educated beyond the masses of England as well. British education was the pinnacle of academic accomplishment, and his education and profession put Gandhi in place to join India’s upper class in wealth.

In 1893 Gandhi accepted a one-year job South Africa—he was not in the fields of nonviolence or social change yet, though he already firmly believed in truth-seeking—and he was hopeful that he could do well on his first case there. On the train from Durban to Pretoria, Gandhi was verbally assaulted and physically thrown off the train, not allowed to ride first class because of his being non-white. In his response lies the lesson. His first instinct was to take the injustice personally and to seek revenge; second he considered returning to India, a safer place where he would be in the racial majority. Through careful thought, however, “he dug deeper to find [his assault’s] root cause in the wide-spread problem of color prejudice in South Africa” (Sethia 33). He depersonalized the experience and widened his focus, acknowledging that any Indian person in his position would have experienced the same, and committed himself to making systematic change. He would address the illness rather than the symptom, for the illness—race relations in colonial South Africa—was widespread and extended well beyond the railway. This example shows Gandhi’s developing sense of satyagraha: he knew the moral truth, or right, of the situation and channeled his “soul force” to accomplishing that truth. It also serves as an early example of Gandhi focusing on swaraj in that he realized that he must begin by controlling himself so that he could hope to make change outside of himself. While that sense of swaraj begins with a focus on the self, Gandhi was not selfish in this matter; indeed, he sought to make the lives of all Indians better by confronting injustice, which shows his desire to make society better for others too.

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1 According to A Students' History of Education in India (1800-1973) (Nayaka & Nurullah): “Literacy rates [not graduation rates or school attendance rates] in British India rose from 3.2 per cent in 1881 to 7.2 per cent in 1931 and 12.2 per cent in 1947.”
tends toward the concept of *sarvodaya*, well-being of all, but does not fully accomplish it as he does not yet consider the marginalized people of other races. The lesson he learned in this situation—from others’ behavior and from the effect of his own response (not an impulsive, but a careful, forward-thinking response)—transformed him into a more focused, productive citizen of the world, and it launched him into a life of activism.

In his stay in South Africa, which was ultimately extended from one year to over twenty, he committed significant time to opposing anti-Indian policies, including unjust taxes levied on Indians and a law requiring Indians to carry identification at all times. He also made great strides in unifying the Indian community and bringing Indians into politics and activism. To create and model strong community and intentional existence, Gandhi built ashrams based on the related principles of *sarvodaya* (well being of all), *swaraj* (self-rule), and *satyagraha* (commitment to truth), discussed above. He also clarified his ideas of *dharma* (a sense of ethical duty) and *ahimsa* (nonviolence). He felt it was his (and our) duty to seek the well-being of all, through *satyagraha* and *swaraj*, staying connected to truth and working from self-rule and development toward freedom for all. *Ahimsa*, nonviolence of spirit and body, was essential in Gandhi’s philosophy and practice.

Indians were technically British citizens because of the specific way in which the British had taken control of India in 1858 after more than two centuries’ presence there. Gandhi’s own perspective was that India had effectively agreed to become and to remain colonized by gradually buying into British values and civilization: “We brought the English, and we keep them. Why do you forget that our adoption of their civilisation makes their presence in India at all possible?” (Gandhi, 72). At any rate, unlike in South Africa, the colonized people of India were citizens of Great Britain. They were certainly not treated as such by most British or by the government, yet Gandhi used this technicality in his logical, ethical campaigns against unjust treatment of Indians.

Two instances showing Gandhi’s claiming of British citizenship to fight for equal rights were in joining the British military operations in the Anglo-Boer War and the Zulu “Rebellion,” and these examples demonstrate well Gandhi’s understanding of the intimate and necessary relationship between rights and responsibility, which we see to be important also in his ashrams and conception of “true civilization.” In 1899, the British went to war against the Boers for ownership of local resources—gold and diamonds. Though the British crown was not kind to the Indians and though Gandhi was opposed to violence, Gandhi still felt duty to support the British war effort. He reasoned that if they hoped to be granted the rights of full citizenship, the Indians needed to demonstrate their willingness to claim the less pleasant aspects of citizenship too. Gandhi managed to rally 1100 Indians to serve in the ambulance corps, and the community fulfilled this moral responsibility to the British.

The war over, Gandhi felt confident that Indians had fulfilled their responsibility to the British and that the British would uphold *their* responsibility to grant equality to the Indians in South Africa, so he left for India. It was soon discovered, however, that the British were operating on a different moral code; indeed, the government’s Asiatic Department even created additional hardships and inequity for Indians at the war’s end. Gandhi returned to South Africa to continue his activism and persuade the government to operate ethically. In the next few years, Gandhi stayed busy and politically active. He
opened and ran a law practice, started the newspaper *The Indian Opinion*, and created his first ashram, Phoenix Farm. He also continued working on the morality of the Indian community, fostering ideas of *dharma* (duty) and *swaraj* (freedom, beginning through self-rule, then extending outward). In short, he recognized the British injustice yet was not defeated. He did not lose hope, and he maintained his commitment to the cause of swaraj and justice.

In 1906, the British planned to respond with military force to a violent rebellion by the Zulu people, and Gandhi again felt the call to duty. He still felt strongly the relationship between rights and responsibility, and he still wanted the rights for the community, so he again reasoned that they must fulfill their responsibility to serve. He brought a force of Indians into the war as an ambulance corps. What he saw there, however, “made him increasingly skeptical of his hitherto genuine belief in the British sense of fair play and justice,” because he saw that there was no rebellion and it was in fact a violent attack on the Zulus (Sethia 59). This experience was important in showing the futility of violence and the importance in listening to one’s conscience, one’s deep knowledge of what is right or true. It did not, however, diminish Gandhi’s belief in the tie between rights and responsibilities; he simply recognized a higher responsibility to attend to human rights and moral truth than to government policy.

We see this philosophy alive also in the model of the ashrams that Gandhi built, and in his conception of “modern civilization” versus “true civilization.” Gandhi said that what most of us mean when we say the word civilization is accrual of wealth and material goods—the newest technology, quick transportation, the ability to buy whatever one wants at the grocery store, etc. This idea, which he termed “modern civilization,” values individual rights over the group’s, bodily welfare and immediate gratification over spiritual wellbeing. It fosters and is characterized by selfishness, lack of morality, and disconnection from the true self and from others. “True civilization,” conversely, is guided by morality and individual sense of duty to the community and all beings (*dharma* and *sarvodaya*), self-discipline and restraint (*swaraj*), preference of moral growth over material growth, and a quest for truth (*satyagraha*). In its attention to the wellbeing of all and lack of power of one over another, “true civilization” then values nonviolence (*ahimsa*) by definition.

Gandhi’s ashrams (two in South Africa, three in India) were communities built on the model of “true civilization” and demonstrate the values therein, including the tie between rights and responsibilities. People lived simply, and all labor contributions were valued equally. The ashrams were a place for residents to practice the “experiments with truth” that Gandhi was fond of. Residents also built skills habits that could apply in larger society and in seeking freedom from the British. They sought to fulfill responsibility to self and community, and they enjoyed the privileges of that community, where ultimately the giving is the reward, where working for the sake of the self and community means that the self and the community are well-tended and healthy. The ends become the means, and vice versa. Fulfilling one’s responsibilities, through *ahimsa* and *satyagraha*, yields the privileges of *satyagraha* and *ahimsa*. Adherence to nonviolence and truth in seeking freedom yields freedom, nonviolence, and truth.

An examination of Gandhi’s voyage and growth helps each of us to see ourselves as being in the midst of a journey, and as having influence on the direction we take. Seeing
that he was not born as the iconic Gandhi that many of us know just a bit about makes his ideas more accessible to us and inspires reflection on our own lives and values. The concepts Gandhi focused on are deep yet simple, so we can all understand—and maybe feel—them. If we listen, we know “the truth,” the “right” way, and we must studiously endeavor to find that truth. The lesson that follows asks eighth-graders to see themselves and their relationships through the lens of Gandhi’s central concepts of truth, community, and duty. The ultimate hope, really, is that they—rather, we all—may be more mindful and gentle in our interactions with ourselves and with our world.

**Bibliography:**


**Teaching Activities:**

In addition to discussing Gandhi’s life (and reading the essay, if appropriate for your students’ reading level) and the example his journey offers us in the lesson of privilege-responsibility pairing, it will be important for students to some self-exploration on this theme. The following prompts and activities are offered for this exploration. Choose the ones that apply best to your group, or add new ideas.

- The following prompts and questions can be addressed through independent writing, a Think-Pair-Share format (first, time to think alone, then to discuss with a small group, then to share out to entire class), jigsaw groups, full-class brainstorms or discussions, research, question-station rotations, or other methods:
  - Define the word *community* and describe the features of a community you would like to (or do) consider yourself a part of. What does a well-functioning community "look like"?
  - What is the role of the individual in community?
  - What does it mean to be selfish?
  - How does sense of community differ in different families or cultures? (Research and/or interview)
  - What do you think you *deserve*:
    - From your family?
    - From society?
    - From school?
  - What are your responsibilities *and* what do you think you *should* be responsible for:
    - To your family?
    - To society?
    - To school?
Compare the words “rights” and “privileges” (you may want a thesaurus or dictionary, or you could survey). How do they compare—what are the subtle differences? Is one more positive? Do the same for the word pair “responsibilities” and “duties.”

How do we know what our rights/privileges and responsibilities/duties are? Does someone tell us? What does that discussion “look like” in your home?

Why does one fulfill one’s responsibilities? What does one get from doing well? Poorly?

Can one have rights/privileges without responsibilities/duties? Vice versa? Is one more important than the other?

How do we know what the “right” thing to do is? What are the benefits of doing the right thing? How does it affect you? Those around you?

Project ideas:

- Make a visual representation of the role of the individual in community.
- Write a charter or constitution for a new community. Explore the difference between phrasing guidelines using do or don’t (e.g. “please don’t run” vs. “please walk”)
- Explore the different ideas of the meaning and importance of the ideas of individual or individuality in two or more groups (families, cultures). Represent that difference visually.
- Make logical privilege-responsibility pairs for someone your age, then for someone of another age group, as you see it. How do they compare? (E.g. one logical pair is that you might be given the privilege of staying up late on weekends, paired with the responsibility to finish all your homework before Monday.)
- Revisit the children’s story The Little Red Hen. It clearly represents this theme of the relationship between privilege and responsibility. Can you think of examples from your life or the world around you where people resist fulfilling responsibilities yet expect privileges?
- Choose someone to interview whom you respect or find successful. (Write questions before the interview!) What does that person have to say about our theme? Does anything about his or her answers surprise you?
- Do an all-class or individual interview (skype) on this theme with someone they admire. (Tom Shadyac?)
- Think about our school: what responsibilities do you think students are really good about fulfilling? Which should they work to improve on? What privileges do you enjoy?

  - Are there privileges you think would be appropriate for you to gain? Make an argument for one of them, framed in the privilege-responsibility relationship. You may want to write a letter to the newspaper or the principal to explore the idea more fully.
  - Are there responsibilities you think would be appropriate for you to gain? Make an argument for one of them, framed in the privilege-responsibility relationship. You may want to write a letter to the newspaper or the principal to explore the idea more fully.
Materials:
Some activities will need no materials. Others may benefit from:
  o Poster paper or chart paper
  o Computers for research and composition
  o A copy of *The Little Red Hen*