Ahimsa Center K-12 Teacher Institute Lesson

Title: Connecting to Place Through Inner Swaraj and Constructive Work

Lesson By: Bonnie Kayser, Clackamas High School, Clackamas, OR

Grade Level/ Subject Areas: High School Art (May be adapted for Language Arts and Social Sciences)

Duration of Lesson: Semester (16 weeks)

Content Standards:
AR.CM.HC.03 Explain how works of art reflect the artist's personal experience, environment, society and culture and apply this knowledge to one's own work

AR.CM.CP.03 Create, present and/or perform a work of art by controlling essential elements and organizational principles and describe how well the work expresses an intended idea, mood or feeling.

Lesson Abstract:
Art students will use Gandhi’s vision of inner-swaraj and constructive work as models for developing a deeper sense of connection and responsibility to the place, community and environment in which they inhabit. Each day will begin with time for quiet contemplation. Initial curriculum will focus on disciplined skill practice, balanced with creative self-exploration. Projects will gradually shift students toward investigating their connections and responsibilities to “the village” they inhabit. Students’ visual responses to their insights will be considered their constructive work, to be used as a form of advocacy.

Guiding Question:
How may Gandhi’s vision of swaraj be relevant in guiding students towards understanding the connections between themselves, the place they inhabit, and their responsibility to the community they reside.

Content Essay:

Connecting to Place Through Inner Swaraj and Constructive Work

Gandhi is often considered to be one of the most influential leaders of the 20th Century. A man of slight physical stature whose only material possessions were a loincloth of homespun fiber and wireframe spectacles, Gandhi created an unexpected image for one referred to as both Mahatma, (“Saint”) and the “Father of India”. None-the-less, he is widely regarded as a pioneer of nonviolent resistance against the social injustices Indians faced under British rule. Since his death in 1948, Gandhi’s work in India has inspired various movements towards democracy, civil and human rights, environmental protection, and sustainable development worldwide (Sethia, 1-3).

The philosopher Gandhi passionately immersed himself in broad-ranging study, prolific writing and social experimentation. Truth was his lifelong pursuit. It was the philosopher who conceptualized swaraj (freedom) as an aim only to be achieved after individuals have found inner
or spiritual swaraj. This was Gandhi’s call to not only free Indians politically, but to free them spiritually. Swaraj is synonymous with self-rule. When we rule ourselves, no one may have dominion over us. It is therefore, as Gandhi quotes, “in the palm of our hands. Do not consider this Swaraj to be like a dream…Such Swaraj has to be experienced by each one for himself. One drowning man will never save another “ (Gandhi, 71). Inner freedom, according to Gandhi, is to be attained through regular meditative practice of self-control: continually moving away from intoxication of Modern Industrial Civilization’s material allure. It is through such practice one is able to experience internal, moral transformation (Gandhi, 71).

Looking forward 100 years after the writing of Hind Swaraj, we see a world where the influence of Industrial Civilization has only increased its scope and scale to the point where “our very existence appears in peril”. We face a rapid increase in environmental destruction, resource loss, population growth & oppressive poverty. Increasing violence simmers world-wide, as nuclear armaments continue to build (Sethia,158). “If humanity should survive there will be a time when the supremacy of Gandhi’s political views will be generally recognized and his work will by far outweigh that of all other statesmen of our time” – Albert Einstein (Sethia, 158).

These are the challenges our students must confront. One may find the reality daunting, but there is no time to hesitate if we are to responsibly usher our students into the world they are to inherit. When looking through this lens, the need for tremendous fortitude, discipline and focus is quite clear. Perhaps Gandhi’s conditions for swaraj are even more relevant now than they were 100 years ago?

So what may we tell our students when they wish to claim this world as home, and save it for future generations? If we listen to many prominent scientists, philosophers and spiritual leaders, hope for our planet rests in our ability to work collectively as a human species (I Am, 2011). Gandhi’s example shows us it is imperative to look to the root of the problem (Sethia, 2). Gandhi would likely argue the core issue lies with Modern Industrial Civilization and the intoxication humans have towards its promise of material wealth. The structure of our civilization is that of a pyramid, with the pinnacle of power shared by only a very few who are supported by an ever-growing poverty-stricken base. The few at the pyramid’s top are demanding far more resources than the earth can sustain, which leaves the remaining masses competing for less and less of a over-taxed planet. The political structures supporting this pyramid require violence and oppression through innumerable practices to remain in power. It is an un-just system. It is an unsustainable system (Singh, 218).

The previously stated, Gandhi’s tools for obtaining a sustainable, egalitarian society begin with self-control and internal transformation. This may be the most challenging step for many, but Grande believed it to be the most important. Satyagraha, training and practice in nonviolent resistance follows. An important element of Satyagraha often not mentioned is that of constructive work and an individual’s civic responsibility to do this work. Without personal fulfillment of one’s duty to society, Satyagraha cannot be realized. According to Gandhi, a just civilization begins with the individual. Each person must do their part for the village, or there is no village. Gandhi emphasized individual responsibility begins with personal practice and is accompanied by constructive work, forming a foundation for an egalitarian society (Parel, xvii – xx).

Some of these concepts are reflected through the writing of contemporary author and educator, Wendell Berry, who best known for his international work on building awareness of place:

A community is the mental and spiritual condition of knowing that the place is shared,
and that the people who share the place define and limit the possibilities of each other's lives. It is the knowledge that people have of each other, their concern for each other, their trust in each other, the freedom with which they come and go among themselves.

In Berry’s opinion, people tend fall into one of two categories as they go about their daily lives in the geographical area in which they dwell: residents or inhabitants. As residents there is not the “buy-in” to place. Residents tend to act more as transients that are present until they can move on to a “better place”. As inhabitants people develop the sense of place, or community, of local customs, art and stories of the founding people both historical and present. Inhabitants commit to bettering the community and landscape in which they live (Berry, 153).

I believe, if there is to be hope for this place we reside, we must follow Gandhi’s lead and first look at ourselves. We must understand the interconnectivity every one of us shares with all life, and thus our inherent responsibility as participants in Earth’s bio-systems. As Grande taught, the work begins with the individual. We need to be active inhabitants of our villages. Then the potential power of billions of individuals, working together as one collective consciousness is perhaps beyond any one person’s imagination. Through millions of tiny associated actions of constructive work, through courageous challenging of the status quo, together we may even save the world.

Bibliography:


I AM. Dir. Tom Shadyac. Flying Eye Productions, 2011. Film


Teaching Activities
Begin each class with quiet contemplation. From there, the possibilities are limitless, and will be applied differently depending on the students and given resources for the semester. Film, stories, free writing, reflection, discussion, questioning, art making for personal inquiry as well as skill development, story telling, reading, journaling, investigating through interviews and media, brainstorming, translating ideas into visual concepts, planning, art making that advocates for
local social/environmental justice, installation for public audience, engagement of audience in a call to action and create a method of recording public responses or outcomes, reflective writing.

Actual form of activist art is up to student choice: may include social justice posters, public installation piece, video, photography, or perhaps a graphic novel (storytelling).

**Reference Materials**

*Story Core* online materials and book “Listening is an act of Love”

“Transformed Classroom”, Tharp, (Activities to develop compassionate classroom).

_A Hidden Wholeness_, Parker Palmer (To help students write and reflect on their work).

_Story Catcher_, Christina Baldwin (Making sense of our lives through the power and practice of story)

“Three Fragments of a lost Tale”, film by John Frame

“The Age of Image: Redefining Literacy in a World of Screen” by Stephen Apkon and Scorsese.

Attenborough’s Salt March Film

Gandhi’s Talisman

Artist activist models such as: WeiWei, JR, Donnella and Dawn, Art 21 (specifically on consumption), Judy Chicago

Stories of:

- Eisenhower – protest Hiroshima
- Diane Nash – freedom Writers

“Ecosystems on the Edge” Smithsonian Site. Teaching videos for environmental science.

Environmental Impact Art Exhibit, 2013

“The Four Agreements” a practical guide to personal freedom.