Ahimsa Center- K-12 Teacher Institute

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Title of Lesson: Building a Learning Community and Gandhi’s Oceanic Circle</th>
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<td>Lesson By: Susan Milan</td>
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<tr>
<th>Grade Level/ Subject Areas:</th>
<th>Class Size:</th>
<th>Time/Duration of Lesson:</th>
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<tr>
<td>K/1</td>
<td>any</td>
<td>30 minutes, intro Plus activities/extensions on subsequent days</td>
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Guiding Questions:
- What is Gandhi’s concept of the oceanic circle?
- How can we use Gandhi’s oceanic circle in developing a classroom community that promotes *ahimsa*?
- What are the levels of community rippling out from individual, to family, to world, as in Gandhi’s concept of the oceanic circle?

Lesson Abstract: (50-75 words)
This lesson uses Gandhi’s concept of the oceanic circle in building a learning community based on mutual respect and equality. This societal structure can be visualized as concentric circles, radiating out from the center in a non-hierarchical fashion, rather than a pyramid with the power being at the top, over the masses at the bottom. In the oceanic circle, the individual is in the center. The circles radiating out from the center include family, school, town or city, state, country, continent, and ultimately the world community. The digital story accompanying the lesson provides a visual representation of this concept, as applied to the learning community.

Lesson Content: (approx. 1000 words)

In 1946, on the cusp of Indian independence, Mohandas Gandhi spoke about his concept of the oceanic circle in his “vision of the relationship between the individual, the state, and the world community” in an interview. (Parel, 1997, p.188) Gandhi’s societal vision for an independent India was based on self-sustaining villages as a power base, composed of strong individuals who honored one another and shared the responsibilities of the village. Gandhi opposed a centralized government, where the power structure was based on the few at the top, prone to oppressing the many at the bottom. He felt that this would be a continuation of the British colonial system, rather than taking the opportunity to create a free and independent India that would truly be an improvement for the masses of people.

Gandhi, born in 1869, devoted his life to fighting racial discrimination and oppression using organized nonviolence, such as marches and boycotts. Through *satyagraha* (the pursuit of truth using nonviolent action), he was able to inspire millions of people to stand up for themselves and regain their dignity. Gandhi lived in South Africa for 21 years and then returned to India to fight for independence from Britain. During this time, Gandhi and the people he worked with developed ways of living and working together in communities based on mutual respect, self-reliance, and equality. The community structure, based on his concept of the oceanic circle, promoted a life of *ahimsa*, or nonviolence in thought and action. Everyone in the community was responsible for
sharing the work, even the jobs that nobody wanted to do, like cleaning the toilets. Gandhi himself participated in all necessary jobs of the village, and did not put himself above the other members of the community. Within the village, people worked to provide their own needs and be independent, while at the same time being willing to help and accept help from others nearby and around the world.

In the 1946 interview, Gandhi describes his vision of the oceanic circle as social structure as follows:

“In this structure composed of innumerable villages, there will be ever-widening, never-ascending circles. Life will not be a pyramid with the apex sustained by the bottom. But it will be an oceanic circle whose centre will be the individual…”

(Gandhi, in Parel, 1997, p.189)

We can visualize concentric circles radiating out from a single point, much like the ripples formed from one drop of water. The concept of the ocean represents expansiveness, without limits. (Sethia, 2009) Gandhi talks about never-ascending circles in this vision, which represents equality rather than hierarchy. No one level, from the individual to the village, to the world community is more important than the other. Instead, the levels of community are dependent on one another and interconnected. Gandhi explains that this structure is quite different from social structures that are based on a “pyramid with the apex sustained by the bottom.” (Gandhi, in Parel, 1997, p.189) In the pyramid model, the few at the top are elevated above the many at the bottom. It is in this structure that mistreatment of the many by the few occurs, through unfair distribution of resources, power, and wealth. Systems based on the pyramid model unfortunately institute laws and customs that can lead to oppression and violence. Gandhi’s creation of villages and communities based on the oceanic circle serve as a model in which equality, fairness, and justice can thrive. In this model, everyone has equal value and the principles of nonviolence such as trust, compassion, truth, and service are the guides to action and thought.

The image of the oceanic circle can easily be applied in creating a classroom learning community. In order for effective teaching and learning to occur, it is essential to create a safe and caring learning community. In this environment, each individual is honored and valued for his or her unique talents, background, and skills. It is equally important to cultivate a sense of shared responsibility. In this way, the group supports each individual in an atmosphere of mutual respect, while each individual is willing to serve and sacrifice for the community. Using Gandhi’s concept of the oceanic circle, or ever-widening circles, the idea of building community expands beyond the classroom. Connections to and interaction with the community at the local, national and international levels expand the notion and experience of the learning community.

The following illustrates each level of the community, in children’s terms, beginning with the individual in the center, radiating out in ripples that are interdependent and mutually respectful of one another:

**Me:** At the center of the circle is each individual. Each person is unique and has special qualities and skills that they bring to the group. Some people are really good at reading, while others are really good at art. Still others are really good at making friends and helping others. Wouldn’t it be boring if we were all the same? Learning to be proud of who you are and being willing to share
that with the group makes you strong in yourself. Everyone can’t be good at everything, so we learn to ask others for help when we need it. We offer to help others when we are able. In this way, we honor the strengths and weaknesses in each of us and feel proud of who we are.

**Family:** Every family is special and unique. Families might have moms, dads, grandparents, sisters, brothers, and pets. As a part of our family, we help to make it what it is. There are all kinds of families with different traditions, backgrounds, games and foods. Our family helps to make us who we are.

**School:** When we go to school, we become part of the classroom and school community. Our learning communities help us grow and learn. We learn much more than reading and math. We learn how to get along with one another and care for each other. Each individual in the learning community is responsible for helping make the classroom a great place to be. We respect ourselves and one another, and share responsibility for being sure that learning is fun and enjoyable. The teacher is a member of the learning community, setting the tone for mutual respect and active participation in the group. Rather than being the “boss” at the top of the pyramid, the teacher is the facilitator and guide. The teacher participates in and encourages discussion and questions to further learning and understanding in a caring environment.

**City or Town:** We all live in or near a city or town. Some towns are very small, with most people living on farms or in the forest. Other towns are larger, but most people know one another. Many people live in cities, from small to huge. Some people have great-great grandparents that live in the same area, while others may have just moved to a new place. Where we live affects who we are, and we help make our town community what it is.

**State:** Every city and town is a part of a state. Each state has its own special qualities. States might have mountains, lakes, rivers, big cities, factories, and of course, all kinds of people.

**Country:** There are 50 states that make up the United States of America, our country. Our country is made up of many different kinds of people that make us who we are. There are more than 300 million, that’s 300,000,000 people who make up our country’s communities.

**Continent:** The United States, Mexico, and Canada are all part of the same continent, North America. A continent is a HUGE island, separated from other continents by oceans.

**Planet/World:** There are nearly 200 countries in the world, where more than six and a half BILLION people live. That’s a BIG, global community.

**Our World Community:** We share the earth and its resources. Although we may live in far-away lands, we are a part of the same community. We work for fairness and caring for everyone in our global community of which we are a part.

Through applying Gandhi’s concept of the oceanic circle in creating the learning community, children develop a sense that everyone is important, respected, and connected to one another. Compassion and trust are nurtured in this environment, as all individuals share responsibility rather than an authoritarian structure that is hierarchical. The teacher in the learning community
serves as a guide and facilitator in ensuring a caring and participatory atmosphere. From this strong base, children look beyond and feel connected to the ever-widening circles of community of which they are members:

**Our Classroom Community:** We are a special and unique classroom community. We take care of and honor ourselves, while reaching out to help others in our state, national and global communities.

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**State Content Standards:**
Washington State Standards, Social Studies:
1.1.1 Understands the key ideals of justice and fairness within the context of the classroom community.

**National Board Standards for Early/Middle Childhood Literacy Teachers:**
Standard III: Equity, Fairness, and Diversity
Teachers practice equity and fairness; they seek and capitalize on diversity and diverse perspectives. They encourage all students to know, value, and respect themselves and others in the classroom, school and larger community.

Standard IV: Learning Environment
Teachers establish with their students a caring, supportive, inclusive, challenging, democratic, and safe learning community in which individuals take intellectual, social, and emotional risks and work both independently and collaboratively.


**Bibliography:**


**Materials Needed:**
- Digital story, “How to Build Community”
- Ball of Yarn/String

**Suggested Teaching Activities:**
1. **Watch Digital Story, “How to Build Community” and discuss:**
   What did you see? What did you think? What did you wonder?
After taking several responses, explain the idea of the oceanic circle, drawing a diagram of concentric circles, with “me” in the center, radiating out to “family, school, town/city, state, country, continent, planet/world.” At each level, explain the concept, including the importance of each individual AND the importance of the interdependence between the individuals. For example, each state has special qualities that make it unique AND the 50 states have much to offer each other. Ask, who has visited another state? How was it different from our state? What did you like about it? Emphasize that at each level, we are part of a community where we are respected and help one another. Our world community is made up of so many different kinds of people. We honor and care for one another, just like in our classroom community. How can we connect with and share with people who live in far-away places in our world community? In our local community?

2. This Little Light of Mine (adapted for building learning community)
   Verse 1:
   This little light of mine, I’m gonna let it shine
   This little light of mine, I’m gonna let it shine,
   This little light of mine, I’m gonna let it shine,
   Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.

   Verse 2:
   The people in my family, I’m gonna help them shine, etc.

   Verse 3:
   These good friends of mine, I’m gonna help them shine, etc.

   Verse 4:
   This big world of ours, we’re gonna help it shine, etc.

   Repeat Verse 1.
   Invite kids to make up their own verses and sing with the group.

3. Friendship Web-Recognizing individual talents and skills that they contribute to the group
   Everyone sits in a circle on the floor. The first person holds the ball of yarn and shares one thing that makes him/her special. That person holds the end of the yarn, and rolls the ball across the circle to someone else. That person holds the yarn, tells one thing that makes him/her special. That person holds that part of the yarn and rolls the ball to another person in a different part of the circle. Continue in this manner, until everyone is holding the yarn, and a web has been created. Explain how important it is to have EVERYONE hold their part of the yarn, or the web will lose its strength. Explain on the count of three, everyone will hold on to the “friendship web” or “community web” and will stand up together, lifting the web off of the floor.
   Holding the web as a group, explain how important it is for each individual to be honored for who they are AND how important it is for each to do their part to help the learning community be a great place to be!