Ahimsa Center K-12 Teacher Institute Lesson

**Title**: Sowing the Seeds of Swaraj

**Name, School Affiliation, Location**: Tazeen Rashid, Suncoast Community High School, Riviera Beach, Fl.

**Grade Level/Subject Area**: High School for introductory session of any subject

**Duration of Lesson**: Approximately 100 minutes

**Florida State Standards**:
- SS.912.C.2.2: Evaluate the importance of political participation and civic participation.
- SS.912.C.2.8: Analyze the impact of citizen participation as a means of achieving political and social change (e.g. boycotts, blogs, protests).

**Teacher Standards**
- 1.1. d. Understand and apply knowledge about the effects of racism, stereotyping, and discrimination in teaching and learning of ELLs from diverse backgrounds and at varying English proficiency levels.

**Lesson Abstract**:
This lesson attempts to lead the students on a journey of exploring their values and principles through self reflection. The goal is to help them establish skills of self awareness and accountability leading to active social participation. This is done through scaffolding questions and activities and by reading some of Gandhi’s own personal stories with regards to truth and honesty. It is hoped that through this lesson, the seeds for the path of swaraj will be sown.

**Guiding Questions**:
1. What is swaraj or self rule and why is it important?
2. How does truth lead to swaraj?
3. What are some of the ways Gandhi led himself to swaraj or self rule as a child?

**Content Essay**: Sowing the Seeds of Swaraj
Mahatma Gandhi was unique in his effort to bring about freedom of India from the British rule. In that, “freedom for Gandhi was neither a condition granted by some social contract nor a gratuitous privilege; freedom was grounded in the moral autonomy of the individual. The social and institutional dimensions of swaraj are enormously dependent upon the individual dimension.” (Iyer, 5) As Gandhi himself said, “it is swaraj when we learn to rule ourselves. It is therefore, in the palm of our hands.” (Parel, 17) This basically means that to reach freedom at a national level, as Gandhi was aiming for- we first have to attain it within us. The beauty of Gandhi’s journey is that he was honestly and persistently self reflective at every landmark of event that befell him and every thought that approached him. There are several characteristics I want to outline here that led to his growth and transformation. Some of these are characteristics that were given, while others are those that he “struggled to cultivate” (Gandhi, 276). So, it is clear that we take what we are given and try to consciously cultivate other traits to take us on the
path of swaraj. Clearly this path is in Gandhi’s own words “hard and steep” (Gandhi, 504), yet is necessary to achieve a level of “civic humanism” (Parel, xxviii) and freedom.

The characteristics that sowed the seed for Gandhi for eventually achieving swaraj were as follows:

**Love for Truth:** Gandhi’s parents played an important role in sowing the seeds for his growth through the values that they practiced. As a young boy “Gandhi admired his father’s truthful and generous nature, and respected his integrity and evenhandedness” (Sethia, 12). This longing for truth also gave him a very active conscious. From a very early age, he developed the habit of questioning his own acts in order to instill truth. Sometimes this came in the form of guilt as is depicted in the incidents when he stole or lied. For example, once he stole money with his brother to smoke. This incident “shook Gandhi to the core” (Sethia, 16). Another time he “stole some gold from his brother’s armlet to pay for his brother’s debt” (Sethia, 17). In both cases Gandhi felt guilty because he had wronged. But this was not the end. He further struggled to re-establish the truth by cleansing himself. How did he do these? In the first case, he went to the temple to cleanse himself…an act that clearly illustrates an effort taken to reverse the wrong. He also vowed never to smoke again. This was an active act on his part to unlearn what did not work for him in establishing honesty and then vowing to never do it again. This personal initiative and sacrifice were for a higher goal of establishing truth within him.

In the second case, he once again bowed down to doing what it takes to re-establish truth. He wrote a letter and hand delivered it to his father confessing that he had stolen. Reading this letter made his father cry and as Gandhi confessed in his book, “these pearl drops of love cleansed my heart” (Sethia, 17).

Finally, a third incident also needs to be mentioned. This is that as a teen, Gandhi vowed never to eat meat for as long as his parents were alive, because it made him lie to them. This was because when he did stealthily eat meat, he would not tell his parents since his parents were vegetarians. So instead of holding on to his palate and enjoying the occasional servings of meat, he once again chose to hold on to truth and give up eating meat so that he would not have to lie (Sethia, 17). These examples illustrate the characteristics that were inherent in Gandhi, mainly his love for truth and his active conscious that he tried hard to keep clear. It also illustrates the characteristics with which he struggled, namely his palate and his own youthful wishes. These examples also illustrate the process of unlearning what does not work, and consciously and actively reestablishing what one values.

**Importance of Fasting**

The above story outlines another “given” seed that played an important role throughout Gandhi’s life. This was the importance of making and keeping vows. As we see in all three situations, Gandhi made a vow to himself to hold on to the truth. This he learnt from his mother. “The qualities that stood out for him in his mother were her religious nature and common sense. In particular, Putlibai’s unflinching commitment to the observance of vows she had taken, and her regular fasts left a lasting impression on the young Gandhi” (Sethia, 12). In his later life, we see several instances where when he kept a vow, he did not break it, and of course, fasting in his later years had become a means for self purification and even a path of nonviolent communication with the Indian people and the British authority.
Love for Service

For Gandhi, truth and service went hand in hand. The value of truth and service “were further reinforced by two legendary figures whose stories he heard as a child. The first was Shran Kumar’s devotion and service to his blind parents” (Sethia, 13). Gandhi’s service to his father in his last days, exemplifies this sense of devotion and service. The second was King Harishchand and his dedication to truth and service to his people. As the legend goes, he “kept his words and promise at the cost of losing his kingdom, wife, himself, and their child” (Sethia, 13). As Sethia notes, “such stories and poetry along with the example of his parents, according to Gandhi, were critical in seeding in him a commitment to truth, service, and integrity, which took deeper roots in him as he was growing up, not withstanding some lapses” (13).

Later in life Gandhi met a poet and a great scholar of Indian scriptures who was also a successful diamond merchant. His name was Shrimand Rajchandra. Gandhi was very impressed and also influenced by his service to business without any attachment to the monetary aspect of the wealth that accrued to him. In his own words, “Raychandbhai’s commercial transactions covered hundreds of thousands. He was a connoisseur of pearls and diamonds… but all these were not the center round which his life revolved. That center was the passion to see God face to face….He was a real seeker of Truth” (Gandhi, 89). This experience later on in his life led him to guide the businessmen in South Africa and India to do their business more justly and truthfully, instead of being selfish and oppressive. Of course, eventually we see that the path of truth and service led him to live a very public life in the service of his community and country and he did what was needed to change himself in order to serve his people for the truths that he wanted to establish much along the lines of his own personal heroes mentioned above.

Appreciation for Pluralism

From an early life, Gandhi was exposed to many sects of Hinduism and other major religions of India. As Sethia notes in her book, his own mother was of Pranami tradition, which was a sect of Hinduism that combined the teachings of the Vedas and the Koran. He was exposed to visitors who were Jains, Muslims, and Parses and he saw that his father showed respect to all of them. As a child he was also exposed to Ramanama by his nurses, in order to help him overcome the “fear of darkness and serpents” (Sethia, 12). Later in life, he was exposed to eastern and western faiths through people and books. Key to Theosophy, by Madame Blavatsky made him delve into his own religion. He learnt Sanskrit to read the Bhagavad Gita and he was eventually most attracted to the concept of Shita Prajna (state of equanimity) which is “the idea of pursuing dispassionate action as duty without being attached to the outcome” (Sethia, 21). But he also pulled values from other religions. “From Christianity he took to heart the Sermon on the Mount. These books reinforced values of truth, nonviolence, compassion and forgiveness.” (Sethia, 23). Later on in his life these experiences led him to appreciate the different religions in the Indian community in South Africa and also in India, and helped him in uniting the Indians in their common goal of swaraj by breaking the walls of different religions and classes. It may be noted that in extending his horizons in this regard, Gandhi also studied atheism.

About his pluralistic view he says, “I may say that my heart has been incapable of making any such distinctions (between people and cultures and religions) as it is in my very nature, rather than a result of any effort on my part” (276, Gandhi). This was an intrinsic characteristic in him, but he actively struggled, read various books to internalize the teachings of others and reached out to people of various groups in the span of his life to truly understand them and translate his appreciation for diversity to compassion and service. In fact it was in interacting and living with the poor in India that truly lifted him to the highest rungs of spiritual
transformation. His understanding of the differences around him led him to develop a sense of unity with others. In his own words, “it is quite proper to resist and attack a system, but to resist and attack its author is tantamount to resisting and attacking oneself. For we are all tarred with the same brush, and are children of one and same Creator and as such the divine powers within us are infinite. To slight a human being is to slight those divine powers and thus to harm not only that being but with him the whole world” (Gandhi, 276). It was this sense of unity in diversity that led him to truly serve others.

Conclusion
Having examined these characteristics, what can we learn from Gandhi? Clearly Gandhi believed in transforming himself first. Once he achieved this, he was more effective socially and politically to bring about social transformations. So, it seems that we can do is to examine our own lives and the values embedded in them and start an internal process of learning and unlearning to establish honesty within us. Then we can hope to participate more effectively in socio-political matters. As Bhikhu Parek noted, “Gandhi articulated a moral vision of human life and thought that the only thing that ultimately mattered was the kind of life human beings lived, the ‘quality of their souls and their social relations’” (1)

Finally, the importance of sharing these anecdotes of Gandhi’s personal life is to sow the seeds of swaraj through self reflection and correction in today’s youth. As Iyer said, “…social and political institutions can create a climate within which individuals may promote their own realization of swaraj” (5). It is hoped as Gandhi hoped that this level of accountability and self correction will lead to a better citizen on the whole.

Bibliography:


Teaching Activities:
Introduce the topic by saying “today we are going to go on a journey to explore our own selves. We will examine our own experiences that form our value system and also examine what we learnt and unlearnt in the process to be who we are today. In the process we will list a few principles that are important to us in guiding our lives. In the end, we hope that we will have a
better sense of who we are within ourselves as students in the school called life and also with respect to each other.”

**Scaffolding Activities**

1. The teacher will ask the students to brainstorm 10-15 minutes on the term “self.” Then, have them create a visual of the words that describe themselves. It should include a few adjectives that reflect their values. They may make a web, a drawing, they may use their name to guide themselves to explore their own self. The teacher will do the same.

2. Once done, the teacher will introduce herself using her visual and then have the students introduce themselves using their visual.

3. The teacher will ask the students to pick 2-3 characteristics/principles that they listed and have them reflect on how they derived those principles or characteristics. The teacher will model this and present her reflections and then ask students to do the same. She will share hers and ask for volunteers to share theirs.

4. The teacher will tell the class that they are going to read about a little boy’s story. The characteristics exemplified in this story made this little boy a famous great man. Screen the story of Gandhi (but don’t have him identified) where he establishes truth as a child, after having lied and stolen. Ask the class what the little boy did each time he lied? What was going on in his mind? Can they relate to it? Why or why not? List a few adjectives describing the little boy.

5. After winding up the discussion on the story of truth, ask students to reflect and write their own story of times when they were not truthful. Allow 15 minutes to do this. Encourage metacognitive thinking by screening the following questions:
   - How did this act make you feel? Write down the thoughts that came in your mind at that time, later on ….  
   - Did these thoughts lead to a corrective action? If so what actions did you take to correct the situation, if any? If no actions were taken, can you do something about it now and what would that be?  
   - Did you make an active plan to vow to never repeat this action and have you been successful at it?  
   - List what you learnt and unlearnt from this experience.  
   - Use an adjective to describe yourself in the light of this experience.  
   - How have these experiences shaped your life since?

6. Have the students volunteer to share their stories and reflections as a class.

**Swaraj : Learning From Gandhi**

7. The teacher will ask the students who they think this boy is. The teacher will reveal to the students that the little boy in the story is Gandhi. The teacher will form groups of four and have the students develop a story line of what they already know of Gandhi as a group for the next 10 minutes.

8. When time is up, the teacher will ask each group to share their story and have one student volunteer to write down some of the adjectives and key terms that the students use to describe Gandhi and his effort. Teacher sums up the story.

9. The teacher will ask the students if they have heard the term swaraj before and generate some knowledge around the term. Explain that it means self rule. Then, the teacher will screen the Essay: Sowing Seeds of Swaraj, and have the class read it in popcorn style.
While the reading is going on, the students are to list the factors that were seeds for Gandhi in paving the path to self rule or swaraj and freedom.

10. Discuss the concept of swaraj and the need for honest self reflection. How can it lead the path to transforming not only themselves, but society?

11. The teacher will put the students back in groups of four and ask them to individually list a few principles that they have imbibed from their own parents, society, books, legends, stories, shows, that have shaped their values/principles. Give them ten minutes to do this. Next, ask them to describe how this will shape their interaction with their classmates in this classroom. If values can be seen as gifts, what gifts can they offer to others? Give 10-15 minutes to do this. Pass out construction paper, and have the students list the “gifts” they can give to others, which is already in themselves. This poster can be posted on the wall for the rest of the year.

**Conclusion:**

1. Teacher will conclude this lesson by explaining the importance of self rule or swaraj as the true basis of freedom of the self from its own ills. This should set the stage in generating more self evaluation first, before judging others or even blaming others. Emphasize that Gandhi did not blame the British but sought to help the Indians to first free themselves of their own ills. This according to Gandhi forms the basis of a civil.

2. Note that Gandhi embodies the teachings of many scholars and philosophers and is unique in actually living the values he learnt from so many. His emphasis on the self is not different from Socrates’ famous saying “know thyself.” Note also that this path is indeed hard, in Gandhi’s own words. But at least the path is paved for us, it is now up to us to venture on it. Have the students all applaud for sharing and celebrating their own stories.

**Use of Digital Story**

3. Show the digital story sum up the concept of swaraj.

4. Ask for students to share their thoughts: do they think it makes sense to them? Is this anything new, if so what is new. If not, have them describe their own version of swaraj.

5. Conclude by explaining that every one may be in different stages in this journey, but the process is the same. As long as we are aware of the process and dedicated to being honest in self correcting ourselves, we can pave the path to swaraj.

**Homework:** Reflection essay: Describe your personal journey that you had in this class today. Did it open any new doors, and where does this take you?

**Materials Needed:**

- Construction Paper;
- Content Essay in Student Version
- Digital Story : Quest to Self Realization