Where You Live and What You Live For Curriculum Unit

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Unit Overview

Designed for junior year English students at Wellesley High School, this unit will facilitate an investigation of several subjects:

1. The writings of Henry David Thoreau, with an emphasis on *Walden*
2. The writings of other authors who explore the concept of place
3. For each student, a personal investigation of a place that holds significant importance to him or her

After several lessons designed to help the students consider the concept of place, the culminating assessment will be a project that will include a visual essay of the place and a 3-4-page personal essay in which they describe a place that holds significant meaning to them, using that place to uncover aspects of their identity and character.

The lessons and the essay will address the following Massachusetts Framework Standards:

1. MA.11-12.RL.1-2, 4-5
2. MA.11-12.R.1-6
3. MA.11-12.W.2.a-f, 3-5
4. MA.11-12.SL.1

Lesson One: Thoreau’s World

Overview: While some students will have read some Thoreau as sophomores (most likely *An Essay on Civil Disobedience*), this lesson will introduce them to Thoreau’s experiences at Walden Pond.

Tasks/Activities:

1. Put up images of Thoreau on the Smartboard
2. Ask students if they have read Thoreau. If so, what? What do they remember? What do they know about HDT?
3. Give a brief overview of Thoreau’s life and times
4. Hand out excerpts from “Where I Lived and What I Lived For”.
5. Describe his experiences there.
6. Show photographs of Walden (taken by me).
7. Focus on quote number one
8. Freewrite: What does it mean to you to live life deliberately? Do you do so now? Are you sucking the marrow out of life? Can you, as a teenager? Is Thoreau’s message still relevant today?

Take Home Tasks: Students will finish excerpts from “Where I Lived and What I Lived For” and read excerpts from Thoreau’s essay “Walking”.

Lesson Two: Finding a Place of Our Own

Overview:

This lesson will allow students to delve into Thoreau’s essay “Walking” while giving them an opportunity to get outside, walk, and start thinking about place.

Tasks/Activities:

1. Students will take along their copy of the essay and a notebook to write in. Once students are ready we’ll head out, taking a path that follows a brook and ending up at a space on the aqueduct near the tennis courts.
2. In a circle we will discuss the essay. First I’ll ask if students have any questions or comments to start, and then, if necessary, I’ll pose the following questions:

* How does this piece of writing compare to the chapter from *Walden* we read the previous class?
* What is Thoreau’s message in this essay? What do you take away from it?
* Read the passage on page 557 (*The Portable Thoreau*) that begins with “I have me with but one or two persons …” Discuss the word origin of “saunter” and ask students why Thoreau finds the activity so vital.
* How does Thoreau use the concept of walking to discuss other topics? Trace his path through the essay.

1. Revisit the personal essay topic (an important place in their lives) and explain how this place where we are sitting is important to me. Touch on the path and how it leads to my late grandmother’s house along with the tennis courts and my experiences coaching and playing there.
2. Return to class.

Take Home Tasks: Free-write some ideas about places that they could write about and read Mary Oliver’s poem “Going to Walden”

Lesson Three: Images of Place

Overview:

As the second component of their project, students will add a visual examination of their place and will get some expert advice on how to take high quality photographs of their place.

Tasks/Activities:

1. Read over Oliver’s poem, asking for questions and comments and revisit the chapter from *Walden*.
2. Explain the visual essay component of the project.
3. Review the following website: http://virginialynne.hubpages.com/hub/How-to-Write-a-Visual-Essay
4. Invite Doug Johnson, Photography teacher at Wellesley High to come in and give some basic tips on how to take a good photograph.
5. Share my photographs of Walden Pond and the surrounding environments.

* What do the photographs communicate about this place?
* What do the photographs make you feel or think about Walden?
* How do the photographs influence the way you feel about Thoreau and the readings?

Take Home Tasks: Go to your place and beginning taking photographs

Lesson Four: Exploring Your Place

Overview:

This class will give students an opportunity to think about the place they chose and to talk about it with another student or other students. This will help them formulate some deeper meaning for their essay.

Tasks/Activities:

1. Write the following quotation on the board:

“Heaven is under our feet as well as over our heads.”   
― [Henry David Thoreau](http://www.goodreads.com/author/show/10264.Henry_David_Thoreau), [*Walden*](http://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/2361393)

2. With a classmate talk about your place. Why did you choose it? What’s your history/story there? What does it say about you – your character, personality, life, aspirations, etc.? In what ways is it your “heaven”?

1. Review the details of the essay assignment. Review and present notes on the following:

* How a piece of creative nonfiction is different than an analytical essay
* Ways to structure the essay
* What the “thesis” can look like and different options for it
* Look at the following Wikipage: <http://www.wikihow.com/Write-a-Descriptive-Essay>

Take Home Tasks: Go to your place. Spend some timing thinking about what it means to you and why it’s important to you. Journal for at least 15 minutes and bring in your work to the next class.

Lesson Five: Digging a Little Deeper

Overview:

This lesson will offer students the opportunity to read other essays about place and to understand one major goal of this essay: to write about themselves – using the structure provided by their place – and craft an essay that goes beyond the superficial to somewhere profound and meaningful.

Tasks/Activities:

1. Give each student a copy of the following two personal essays about place: “The Memory Place” by Barbara Kingsolver and “My Manhattan: A Lifetime of Memories and Magic” by Wendy Wasserstein
2. Read the Kingsolver essay aloud as a class, asking for volunteer readers. Discuss as we read, stopping after each second paragraph to field and pose questions. Guiding questions: what is Kingsolver saying and how is she saying it?
3. Have students read the Wasserstein essay on their own. When they are done, break the class into groups of three to discuss and compare/contrast with the Kingsolver essay. Ask for take-aways when they are done.
4. Write examples of superficial thesis statements on the board. Discuss how to make them better.
5. Referring to their journal notes from the previous class’s homework, write down 2-3 potential thesis statements for their essay on place. Ask for volunteers who would like to share and give constructive criticism – both from me and other students.

Take Home Tasks: Photo Essay and Personal Essay due in a week and a half.

Place Assessment Guidelines

For this short unit, we will be studying the works of Henry David Thoreau, among other writers. Our readings will use Thoreau’s work *Walden* as a foundation to springboard to a personal examination of place. This examination will result in two assessments:

1. A photo essay consisting of photographs placed on a poster board and accompanied by short written explanations.
2. A 3-4-page personal essay that explores the meaning of your place – how it has played a role in your life, why it is important to you, and what it says about who you are.

After we have completed the readings about what a particular place means to Thoreau and other writers, you are to choose a place that is important to you. I recommend that you choose somewhere that is easily accessible and close to you since you will need to go there, write there, and take pictures there. This place may be a room in your house, a section of your yard, a spot in your town, a favorite hangout, etc.

The Photo Essay (50 points)

Take a significant number of photographs of your place. Try to employ different perspectives, angles, and compositions. Choose 10-12 of your best photos and logically place on a poster board in a way that helps tell the story of your place. Below each photo, write a brief, 1-2-sentence explanation of what that photo shows. Be prepared to share your photo essay with your classmates.

The Personal Essay (100 points)

Write a 3-4-page piece of creative nonfiction (a personal essay) about your place. Make sure your essay has a clear thesis or message. This should be a multi-paragraph essay that follows all guidelines for writing in this class (header, double-spaced, 1-inch margins, Times New Roman). The message should examine what the place you chose says about you and your place in the world. We’ll brainstorm together as a class, and we’ll meet individually in order to go over structure, message, etc.