

The Nature Seminar

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Introduction
Ceremonial Time

Souhegan High School is a member of the Coalition of Essential Schools, created by TedSizer and based at Brown University. As such, Souhegan has a strong mission statement, which emphasizes that we aspire "to be a community of learners born of respect, trust, and courage. We consciously commit ourselves:

- To support and engage an individual's unique gifts, passions, and intentions.
- To develop and empower the mind, body, and heart.
- To challenge and expand the comfortable limits of thought, tolerance, and performance.
- To inspire and honor the active stewardship of family, nation, and globe."

We adhere to the ten common principles which govern the Coalition, and maintain a democratic environment in which students have an equal voice in decision-making (there is no student council; instead, we have a community council made up of students, faculty, staff, and administration). In fact, we require that students practice decision-making and problem solving in an environment that values their participation. We strive for an atmosphere of unanxious expectations. We also believe that all students can learn, can attain academic success, and achieve accepted standards of academic competence. Our classrooms are heterogeneously grouped and fully inclusive. There are no bells at the school, no hall passes, no study hall, and no faculty duty such as cafeteria or hall monitoring. We strive for an environment which stresses a clear and active sense of purpose.

As a member and curriculum coordinator of the English Department at Souhegan, I am in the unique position of teaching in a senior-level interdisciplinary course titled the Nature Seminar with Dan Bisaccio, curriculum coordinator of the Science Department (see attached course descriptions/overviews). Both Dan and I already incorporate Thoreau extensively into our curriculum, not just as a single unit, but the grounding to which we return throughout the year. This fall, I plan to introduce John Mitchell's *Ceremonial Time*, either concurrently while they are reading *Walden*, or immediately following the discussion and projects associated with that text, in order to reinforce the students'

understanding of the importance of social, cultural, and historical mapping of a particular area within their community.

At the same time that students are reading Emerson and Thoreau, and striving to achieve an appreciation and understanding of their works both in the 19th-century and in terms of today's environmental and social discourse, they are also involved in detailed mapping of their 12' x 12' quadrats in the Biodiversity plot adjacent to the school and bordering the Souhegan River. This is important field work not only for this course, but because their data is entered into larger international research project monitored by the Smithsonian Institute; we maintain a similar plot at El Eden in the Yucatan peninsula of Mexico, which is visited by members of the class each spring. The students learn to read a landscape, measure tree diameter, take soil samples, identify species, and finally, produce not only the computer data, but present a project on terrestrial succession (see handouts).

We spend a fairly good amount of time outside year-round. Weather is not a factor; students know that they must dress appropriately and be aware of inclement conditions. The biodiversity "unit" is introduced immediately in the fall; Dan and I will have measured off a successive hectare, but students are responsible for individual quadrat measurements and all data collections from that point until the end of the academic year. We generally divide the class into groups of four or five; each group is responsible for one quadrat. This is also the time of year during which the students are reading Emerson's *Nature 1836*, *Walden*, and "Walking" for the first time. We take a trip to Walden Pond as part of our geology and terrestrial succession inquiries, and we merge both the scientific/naturalistic readings of the landscape with some more reflective and literary journal writing while at the pond.

This fall, however, I want to take the students' inquiry even further, and make it more "real" to them in terms of their own community. Because they often question Thoreau's true motives of being at Walden, and tend to have difficulty grasping the importance of community and history, I am planning the following: while the students are working on the physical aspects of the biodiversity plot, reading the physical landscape and making deductions based on their scientific research, they will also be doing some cultural and historical "digging" of the same area. They usually end up with a pretty good idea of the physical place, and make accurate assessments of previous land use based on their findings. But they never have really had a chance to make connections to the history and early culture of the area. The town of Amherst is rich in resources; they are one of those small New England towns that takes great pride in who they are and from whom they've descended. And, it turns out, Thoreau actually visited the town and gave a version of "Walking" as a lecture (I don't think I'll tell them this, but see if they can find it out for themselves, as well as the audience's response to his talk). I'd like the students to move backwards through the history; rather than begin with documents of the 18th- and 19th-centuries; I'd like them to try and make these discoveries in reverse order, based on hypotheses they come up with from their work with Dan and the physical changes in the landscape. So, as they read the landscape, they will also learn how to read a community.

We base our investigation of nearly everything at Souhegan around essential questions (EQ). These are designed to be specific enough to indicate and guide the students in the direction of their inquiry, but expansive enough to not be answered with a simple "yes" or "no." Some examples of these are found on the seminar course descriptions; generally, each new topic is introduced via an EQ. With this in mind, I offer the following topic overview for "*Ceremonial Time*, Past Lives, and Who We Are".

Ceremonial Time -- John Hanson Mitchell [\[Back to Contents\]](#)

EQ: How can we live without our lives?

How can we know it's us without our past?

You have been reading a landscape that is becoming increasingly part of your daily lives; you are beginning to know this place in ways you may not know other places. And yet you *do* know other places innately and deeply; you, like Thoreau, can find your path in the woods at night better by your feet than your eyes. But how does your personal knowledge of this place connect with the past? And how can we know who we are without knowing from where we've come?

In *Ceremonial Time*, John Hanson Mitchell offers a way of reading the landscape and reaching into the past and making it part of the present. As you read Mitchell's words, you will not only be continuing your "reading" of your own quadrat, but you will be reading the landscape of Scratch Flat as well. And through the models provided by Mitchell in his research, you, too, will find out what kinds of communities, cultures, and social structures fed into the land you are walking along the Souhegan River.

Your investigation will begin in the present: using your field work and scientific readings of the landscape, you will begin to think about the "who" and the "how" of this land and its community. You should also keep in mind not only Mitchell's model in *Ceremonial Time*, but what Thoreau's close observation revealed about both Walden Pond and the town of Concord. The following are some suggestions of where you might continue this research:

-- Amherst town records in the Town Hall, library, historical society, and conservation commission.

-- Questions to consider:

- who lived here, when, and for how long?
- any significant weather events?
- geology -- what happened *before* humans?
- land use -- what happened *because of* humans?

-- You should also consider how Mitchell conducted his cultural, historical, and social research (hint: good investigation involves good interviewing)

Now, based on your findings, what conclusions can you draw about this land and its communal history?

You may present your findings in whatever public forum you desire -- a historical reenactment, a dramatic reading, a poster session, a poetry reading, a Thoreau-like Lyceum lecture.

Be creative, but be true to the story of the land and its community.