



Gauguin, "Where Do We Come From? What are We? Where are We Going?"

“Let Us Consider the Way in Which We Spend Our Lives”: Thoreau and the Autonomous Learner Model

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10-12
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ABSTRACT: Students in a 10-12 Talented and Gifted seminar course will use ideas from Thoreau as an extended metaphor of self-reflection throughout the semester in partnership with the course program model of Autonomous Learning to better understand their interior/exterior sense of place.

A note about the TAG class at Valley High School...It is called “Extended Learning,” and it meets twice a week in a seminar format. Students take the class for three years. The course itself

doesn't vary from year to year; rather what the students want to get out of the class varies as the student evolves through different years in school. The West Des Moines District uses George Betts' Autonomous Learner Model for their TAG programming model. Classes are integrated by grade level, 10-12th grade, so each student is pursuing an individual response to the activities separate from his or her peers.

DURATION AND OBJECTIVES--Throughout first semester, students will connect ideas from Thoreau's work with the aspects of the George Betts' Autonomous Learner Model (ALM) in order to deepen:

- metacognition
- social-emotional awareness
- self-guided passion-based learning
- awareness of giftedness using Thoreau as an exemplar
- connection between self and environment

OUTLINE: Using Thoreau's ideas in conjunction with Betts' ALM, students will work on Orientation (an examination of social-emotional needs/one's giftedness), Individual Growth (career/college and life after Valley), Seminars (discussions on topics of personal interest), In-depth Projects (pursuing passion-based learning), and Enrichments (service, cultural or leadership outings). Students will gain an appreciation for "sense of place" by first understanding who they are as they navigate the world and then determining how best to share their gifts and talents with their community.

On the first day of the semester, students will enter the room and see a picture of me with my dog in a local park near my home, and the tagline "Where is your Walden?" I will talk with them about Thoreau's Walden, include some quotes from his work, and then let them know that as we move through the activities below throughout the semester, they will be returning to the idea of "Where is Your Walden?" for the semester-end reflection.

LESSON DETAIL:

Activity One/Orientation and Individual Growth:

Borrowing from the title of the Gauguin painting as stated in the cover page for the unit, students will be asked to reflect first on:

--Where do they come from?

They will do this by bringing in an object the first week of school that reflects a sense of who they are/where they come from. They will "read" the object for us, using a tactile interpretation to reveal a sense of self. This will not only serve as a means of introduction, but it will invites students to begin to engage with the temporal world through experiential readings

of the physical stuff of their lives. This will encourage students to begin thinking about what matters to them, what grounds them, what their current "sense of place" is.

--Who are we?

Students create a resume in class that is used for teacher recommendations. Before they do this task, they will pair their identities that are more easily quantified in achievements and measurable accomplishments with their psychic existence in the world. In conjunction with the resume, each student will bring in at least four photos to share that document "who they are." These photos may represent who they are as students, employees, brothers/sisters, athletes, people of faith...The hope with the two-fold approach to this is that they see themselves as having some agency in the community based on their identities. This assignment will be done in September.

--Where are we going?

Students write college/scholarship essays in November. Reflecting on their object, their photo collection and their resume, they will use these artifacts as starting points for the essay writing. We will discuss Thoreau and his approach to writing/journal keeping/the study of a subject and the self. Their "sense of place" angle here will be on a vision of their future lives--what matters to them about where they live and the communities they occupy?

For their semester final, Students will write a reflective response addressing the prompt, "Where is your Walden?" After a semester of considering Thoreau and his ideas and applying those ideas to the students' lives, they should have some footing to be able to step back and discuss where their Walden is. By exploring "sense of place" as a physical and spiritual/emotional construct, they should be in a place to articulate this. The reflective essays for class often morphs into college essays, although at the outset, the audience is strictly me as the classroom teacher. This will be due in December/January.

Activity Two/Seminar:

Students will get a copy of each article (see links below) and discuss the ideas of simplicity and possessions/stuff in relation to both a physical and metaphysical existence. How might the way in which they occupy a physical "sense of place" contribute to their own mental well being? See Seminar activity for possible questions. This will be done in August.

<http://www.npr.org/books/titles/363739801/the-life-changing-magic-of-tidying-up-the-japanese-art-of-decluttering-and-organ#excerpt>

http://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/04/opinion/thoreau-the-first-declutterer.html?ref=topics&_r=0

Activity Three/Enrichment:

For their cultural/service/leadership teacher-led immersion activity for the semester, each class will take a field trip to Raccoon River Nature Park. The intent of the outing will be for students to experience a sense of place and wildness that is in stark contrast to their usual classroom environment, even though this park is just a few miles from the school. There is a three-mile loop around the lake, and the students and I will walk the loop in October. Minimal instructions will be given prior to the field trip other than to quiet the mind and be in the moment as they walk. Students will be allowed to choose *how* they make this loop--do they explore? Go off trail? Walk alone or in groups?

When each class meets next in the classroom, the students will be asked to reflect in writing on their experience using one of the entrance slip writing prompts (quotes from Thoreau).

Activity Four/In-depth Project:

Students will be designing a passion-based project that they will complete in one semester or up to six semesters in their time at Valley. The intent of the project is to provide an opportunity for learning that is an authentic fit for the student's interests and current passions, and the sequence of activities is designed and directed by the student. To add a layer of authenticity to the work, students will be asked to weave in a place-based grounding to their projects by addressing this idea: how does the project immerse you in the local heritage, culture or landscape? As an example of a project, a student is working on a community-wide newspaper for the homeless with articles written by the homeless in our metro area. This newspaper would also inform readers of ways to provide assistance, agencies to support...This type of in-depth project is immersed in the broader community.

LIST OF MATERIALS:

- **Object Activity: Where Do You Come From?**

High School can often feel like a time of change and growth. That isn't a bad thing, but in this liminal point in your life, it can be helpful to remember your roots, your grounding.

For this activity, bring to class an object that showcases "where you come from." This might be symbolic of a literal place, an activity that you do, a value that you hold...whatever grounds and roots you.

We will be sharing these with the class as a way to gain a sense of the others in the room and what matters to them.

"Talk of mysteries! Think of our life in nature,--daily to be shown matter, to come into contact with it,--rocks, trees, wind on our cheeks! The *solid* earth! The *actual* world! The *common sense*! *Contact! Contact! Who are we? Where are we?*"

--Thoreau, Journals

- **Resume Assignment**

Part One:

What are you doing? You are creating or updating a resume to be used by teachers to write recommendations for scholarships or college applications. Consider the audience and purpose for this resume.

How should you do this? List your academic accomplishments, volunteer activities, school activities, employment history, athletic/drama/music/debate involvement...and if you won specific awards in any of these areas. Highlight anything unique about you that might help a teacher write you a better recommendation (i.e. you speak a second language, you have traveled extensively outside of the U.S.)

Include a narrative description for the items on the resume. (See student example as a guide.) A teacher will find the descriptors you provide on your resume very useful when writing your recommendation letter.

General tips:

- Mention that you are either in the Honors Program and/or in the Extended Learning Program. State what you projects you have done that may be of note.
- List the AP courses you have taken and scores received if you did well.
- Consider listing other test scores if they make you stand out.
- No need to include references given the nature of this resume.
- Avoid the first person point of view when writing the resume.
- Select an easy-to-follow format and be consistent.
- Tell the truth. It is better to have an honest resume than a padded one.

Part Two:

Bring in at least four photos to share that document who you are. These photos may represent who they are as students, employees, brothers/sisters, athletes, people of faith...These photos will be shared with the class as a means of balancing or possibly

juxtaposing the linear depiction of self required by a resume by establishing your sense of place in a more visual fashion. This assignment will be done in September.

"I live in the present. I only remember the past, and anticipate the future. I love to live."

--Thoreau, *Correspondence*

- **College Essay**

"If I am not I, who will be?"

--Thoreau

"How vain it is to sit down to write when one has not stood up to live."

--Thoreau

"It is not what you look at that matters, it is what you see."

--Thoreau

Now that you've shared an object that shows where you are grounded, completed your resume, and provided pictures to illustrate your more complete sense of self, your next Individual Growth assignment is the **college essay**. Depending upon your grade in school, the college essay will serve a different function. For sophomores, you may view this assignment strictly as writing practice. For juniors, you may need an essay for National Honor Society or National Council of Youth Leaders. You may also need an essay for part of an application for a summer program. Seniors, In addition to possibly needing essays as part of your college applications, you can also use essays for scholarships. No matter what year you are in school, this assignment should feel practical and useful.

For this college essay, there is no designated prompt. Select one from the Common Application, the National Merit application (if this applies to you), a leadership prompt (NCYL folks), or go to a potential college where you may be applying and select one of the essay questions. You may also write an essay for a scholarship.

Length limit for college essay: 500-650 words

Some questions to ask yourself as you write:

--Is my essay in first person?

--Does this essay reveal something about me that can't be showcased on my resume, in my application, or in my recommendations from teachers?

--Am I truthful?

--Am I moving my essay to a point of reflectiveness when examining my paradoxical qualities?

If need be, review the college essay powerpoint on the "S" drive.

- **In-depth Project**

As we discussed in class, the in-depth project is a place for you to sink into passion learning, an opportunity to actualize a commitment to something bigger and more extensive than a classroom assignment. What matters to you? What are you curious about? What stokes your fire? What calls you to action? What draws your interest? What have you yet to explore? How can you make an impact on your community? You can do this in one semester or up to six semesters of time in ELP/Honors.

For your in-depth project plan, you will complete the following categories on the Google Doc General Plan that you will receive as an email at your WDM district address. **Copy the document, save on your drive, rename it, and print a copy of this when turning in to me. At the end of the semester, you will send me an electronic file.**

Cover the following sections:

--Basic student information (should already be done)

--Specific strength areas (should already be done)

--In-depth project goals/action plan/desired outcomes/place-based application for in-depth project:

Mentors: I have a separate pre-mentoring activity you will do instead of this.

Plan=75 points

Plan due September 6 for Orange sections, September 7/8 for Black sections

PROGRESS CONFERENCES:

For each progress conference, you will be expected to provide tangible evidence of your progress on your in-depth project, lead the conference, and establish/revise goals for the next conference as well as sketch out plans for the presentation at the end of the semester. Each conference is worth 30 points. **For each conference, you will complete an update of the Google doc PELP.**

Progress Conference One: September 23, Orange sections; September 24/25, Black sections

Progress Conference Two: October 30, Orange sections; October 28/29, Black sections

Progress Conference Three: November 28, Orange sections; November 29/30, Black sections

POSTER:

Once your project has been confirmed, submit a poster for display in the ELP/Seminar room that includes:

- a picture of yourself
- what grade you are in
- the topic of your project

Due date: Orange: September 6; Black: September 5

Point total=10

"If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them." Thoreau, *Walden*

- **Seminar Discussion**

Before beginning the discussion of the readings, I would share the two quotes from Thoreau as a way to set the tone for the intended discourse of a Seminar:

"The universe is wider than our views of it."

"Nay, be a Columbus to whole new continents and worlds within you, opening new channels, not of trade but of thought."

--Thoreau, *Walden*

Questions for Thoreau Seminar:

1. Think about your backpack, locker, car (if you have one), room, apartment/house...where do you weigh in on the idea that American have too much stuff?
2. How might our possessions both ground us, giving us a sense of security, but also inhibit our freedom?
3. What would be some essentials for you that you would want to take to college? What does that say about what you value?

4. What stuff do we have in our lives that has made it significantly better? Detracted from our quality of life? How so?
5. How have you--if you have--or how might you "occasionally stand offstage from your daily routines to grasp what is important to you"?
6. Does the KonMari method hold any appeal to you? Could you keep only those things that you love?
7. Agree or disagree with the writer's contention that "a dramatic reorganization of the home causes correspondingly dramatic changes in lifestyle and perspective. It is life transforming."
8. Thoreau said in his *Correspondence*, "I do believe in simplicity. It is astonishing as well as sad, how many trivial affairs even the wisest man thinks he must attend to in a day...So simplify the problems of life, distinguish the necessary and real." What are the "trivial affairs" that are tugging at your days? Do you see ways to simplify those matters?

- **Wilderness Reflection Entrance Slip**

Reflect in writing on your walk around Raccoon River Nature Park using one of the following quotes from Thoreau as a starting point for your own experiences:

--"The most alive is the wildest." *Walking*

--"It is vain to dream of the wildness distant from ourselves. There is none such."
Journal, 30 August 1856

--"We need the tonic of wildness...At the same time that we are earnest to explore and learn all things, we require that all things be mysterious and unexplorable, that land and sea be indefinitely wild, unsurveyed and unfathomed by us because unfathomable. We can never have enough of nature." *Walden: Or, Life in the Woods*

--"My desire for knowledge is intermittent, but my desire to bathe my head in atmospheres unknown to my feet is perennial and constant. The highest that we can attain to is not Knowledge, but Sympathy with Intelligence." *Walking*

- **Presentation/Reflection**

Objectives:

- To share your project/independent study with an audience

- To effectively facilitate group discussion/participation
- To demonstrate confidence in expressing ideas both orally and in writing
- To expand self-awareness

Presentation (50 points):

In a 10-15-minute presentation, you will share a sense of your project with the class. As you prepare for this, consider the following questions:

What did you do for your project?

How did you complete it?

How did you advance or deepen your understanding of the subject?

What new questions came up as part of the work you did on the project?

What is your end product?

What should others know about the project?

How can others benefit from learning about your project?

How did your project enhance your connection to your community, develop a stronger sense of place?

Evaluation criteria:

Your presentation should last approximately 10-15 minutes and will be evaluated on:

1. How well you explain or show what you have accomplished
2. How well you relate the subject to the audience
3. How well you involve the audience

Reflection (75 points):

On the first day of the semester, we explored the idea of “finding your own Waldens.” To further understand what this might mean, throughout the semester, we spent time with Thoreau through his words and ideas. We explored simplicity, we took nature walks, and ultimately we did activities through the Autonomous Learner Model that allowed us to “consider the way in which we spend our lives.” As you review the last five months, how would you put words to where your “Walden” is? This might encompass school, activities, sports, work, music, theater, a job, nature, time with friends and family...you get to decide. As you write, strive to be as specific as possible in showing this “place” on the page.

“Not till we are lost, in other words, not till we have lost the world, do we begin to find ourselves, and realizes where we are and the infinite extent of our relations.”

--Thoreau, *Walden*

(The grade for this reflection is listed under the “Final” category under Infinite Campus—thus, it is a stand-alone grade. Everyone does this assignment, including the mentors.)

Product (50 points):

This is too unique to each person's project to describe on an assignment sheet. When we meet for your final project conference, we will determine what your "product" will be based on given what your project entails.

Note: Beyond copies of the handouts for the activities listed above as well as copies of the readings for the Seminar, no materials are necessary to complete the above activities.

GRADING SYSTEM:

Object Reading Activity: 10 points

Resume Assignment: 20 points

College Essay: 50 points

Indepth Project Plan/Project: 75 points for the plan, 90 points for progress conferences, 50 points for the presentation, 50 points for a product if applicable

Seminar Discussion: 50 points

Wilderness Reflection Entrance Slip: no credit

No rubrics are included for the activities in this unit. Given the Autonomous Learner Model intent, students create their own assessments. Teacher feedback is provided in a narrative format, and students work on continuously updating their Personalized Education Plan and writing reflections throughout the semester/year.

OTHER:**District Objectives/Standards:**

West Des Moines Community Schools Extended Learning Program – Student Goals Below is an overview of goals for our students. Students will have specific goals on the Personalized Educational Learning Plan (PELP) to meet their individual needs.

Goal 1: In order to develop collaboration and leadership skills, the student will... Outcome: Develop ability to work effectively within a team to enhance productivity. Develop social skills that enable students to build their leadership skills, interpersonal skills, and ability to effectively relate to others in a variety of situations. Manage and resolve conflicts Effectively participate in group discussions.

Goal 2: In order to develop complex communication skills, the student will... Outcome: Successfully share information through multiple means, including visual, digital, verbal, and nonverbal interactions. Interact effectively with people of diverse backgrounds in a variety of settings. Participate in meaningful and engaging interactions. Accurately exchanges information and ideas which are appropriate, purposeful, clear, and concise.

Goal 3: In order to develop creative and critical thinking, the student will... Outcome: Challenge assumptions, engage in higher order thinking, develop new insights, and validate perceptions through thoughtful questions. Analyze and synthesize multiple sources and points of information. Incorporate curiosity and innovation to generate new or original thoughts, interpretations, products, works or techniques. Frame critical issues to develop innovative responses. Engage in abstract reasoning and divergent thinking. Identify and solve complex problems.

Goal 4: In order to develop their intrapersonal skills, the student will... Outcome: Form an accurate perception of their academic abilities, capabilities, and potential. Demonstrate initiative, self-direction, and personal responsibility. Demonstrate motivation and commitment to achieve. Utilize metacognitive skills that foster independent and self-directed learning. Respect the unique qualities of self and others.

Goal 5: In order to develop flexibility and adaptability, the student will... Outcome: Respond and adjust to situational needs; changing to meet the challenges of new roles, paradigms and environments. Embrace change -expecting and accepting the emotions inherent to change. Reflect on positive and negative outcomes of risk-taking. Undertake tasks that have uncertain outcomes.

Bibliography:

Heitman, Danny. "Thoreau, the First De-Clutterer." *The New York Times*. 3 July 2015.

Kondo, Marie. "The Life Changing Magic of Tidying Up." NPR.

Kramer, Jeffrey (editor). *The Portable Thoreau*. New York: Penguin Books, 2012.