

Finding Comfort in an Unfamiliar Landscape

Urban Youth Explore Nature



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Rationale

I became acutely aware of how an unfamiliar landscape can be unsettling when I had the opportunity to drive my student Tony to an audition at Concord Academy for the Summer Dance Program, and return him to the comforting environs of his city dwelling. Truly there were many factors that might have produced this uneasiness: stress of the audition, the major socioeconomic contrast between his life and the people of Concord, and the fact that Tony is African-American and Concord's population is predominantly Caucasian. However, upon leaving he said to me, "It's just too quiet." As we got closer to the city I observed his comfort level increase. He definitely belonged to this urban landscape. So when he was accepted to the program; I wondered how comfortable he would be. Last week, two weeks into the program, I paid Tony a visit at Concord Academy. This was a changed young man. He greeted me smiling, confidently striding around the campus exchanging greetings with fellow dancers and most amazingly, at ease with his physical surroundings. I photographed him on the grass with the 'wildness' as a background. And then we talked. I repeated to him his earlier statement about Concord being "too quiet". He said, "All my life I've been living in a place where it's never quiet." He then commented that he had gradually gotten use to the difference and unexpectedly has come to like the quiet. However, he assured me that there was no way he would want to attend CA all year around. As we walked to my car and his dorm, we came across a puddle at the bottom of a slope; he poked around with his foot exclaiming how he had seen four toads earlier in the day and that the following day he was going canoeing.

There is no question that there were many variables that led Tony to be more comfortable in this unfamiliar landscape. Tony is affable, handsome, and in this community, somewhat exotic. But I would also like to think that the quietness, natural environment, and dance eased him into accepting what seemed strange at first. The photos show a young dancer comfortable with himself and his natural surroundings.

How do I begin to introduce my urban students to the riches of the wild? Can a study unit based on nature and incorporating reading, writing, observing, drawing, choreographing, and dancing provide them with the opportunity to become comfortable in a different environment? This unit, **Finding Comfort in an Unfamiliar Landscape**, I hope will begin the process, a process that is expressed through art.

Henry David Thoreau

Writings on Nature

Essential Question (goal):

How does reading Henry David Thoreau's writings on nature and making a personal connection to a positive experience in nature through writing, allow us to find comfort in an unfamiliar landscape?

Outcomes (objectives):

1. Students will recognize the writings of a prominent American writer.
2. Students will be able to analyze written text making connections to personal prior experience.
3. Students will discuss in small and large groups their findings.
4. Students will organize ideas in writing using Standard English conventions.

Content (concept):

Students will be given a verbal abridged introduction to the life, philosophy, and writings of Henry David Thoreau. Additionally they will be given short quotes from Thoreau that relate to nature. Students will be asked: What particular words conjure up images of nature? What words are explicit to nature? What words or phrases are reminiscent of their experiences with nature? What images are new to them?

Motivational strategies:

Individually students will read and analyze the quotes and together we will discuss their meaning. Students will be asked to choose one quote that has particular meaning for them. They will use that quote as inspiration to write about a positive personal experience with their natural surroundings.

Assessment: (20 %)

Students will be asked to share their writing with the class. Additionally, a class discussion addressing the **Essential Question** will follow. The written portion of the assignment will be evaluated using a form provided to each student prior to the completion of their essay. The essay will count for half of the points in this lesson, the remainder of the points given for classroom participation.

Frameworks:

English Language Arts: 1.5, 2.5, 4, 4.5, 8.29, 8.30, 8.33, 9.4, 9.5, 15.7, 19.24, 19.26, 21.8, 22.9, 23.12, 23.13

Connection Strands: History, Criticism, and links to other disciplines.

Henry David Thoreau Writings on Nature

Directions for classroom work: Read the following quotes by Henry David Thoreau. In your notebooks, write down your interpretation of each quote. We will discuss their meaning as a group.

Homework: Following the discussion you will choose one quote that inspires you to write about a positive personal experience you had with nature. Your essay should relate to the quote. Please follow the evaluation form to complete the assignment.

It has come to this,—that the lover of art is one, and the lover of nature another, though true art is but the expression of our love of nature. It is monstrous when one cares but little about trees and much about Corinthian columns, and yet this is exceedingly common.

—October 9, 1857

Nature, the earth herself, is the only panacea.

—September 24, 2859

Measure your health by your sympathy with morning and spring. If there is no response in you to the awakening of nature,—if the prospect of an early morning walk does not banish sleep, if the warble of the first bluebird does not thrill you,—know that the morning and spring of your life are past. Thus may you feel your pulse.

—February 25, 1859

Catch the pace of the seasons; have leisure to attend to every phenomenon of nature, and to entertain every thought that comes to you. Lt your life be a leisurely progress through the realms of nature, even in guest-quarters.

—January 11, 1852

Nature must be viewed humanly to be viewed at all; that is, her scenes must be associated with humane affection, such as are associated with one's native place, for instance. She is most significant to a lover. A lover of Nature is preeminently a lover of man. If I have no friend, what is Nature to me? She ceases to be morally significant.

—June 30, 1852

I love nature, I love the landscape, because it is so sincere. It never cheats me. It never jests. It is cheerfully, musically earnest. I lie and rely on the earth.

—November 16, 1850

Once I was part and parcel of Nature; now I am observant of her.

—April 2, 1852

Name _____
Date _____

**Henry David Thoreau
Writings on Nature
Essay Assessment**

*(We will discuss this evaluation form so that you know what I expect from each one of you.)

- | | |
|---|-------|
| 1. Student organizes ideas clearly. | /20 |
| 2. *Student uses Standard English conventions. | /20 |
| 3. Student makes connections between a Thoreau quote and their personal experience. | /25 |
| 4. Student makes revisions. | /20 |
| 5. Name, date, title, submitted on time. | /15 |
| | <hr/> |
| | /100 |

Boston Nature Center
Mass Audubon
500 Walk Hill Street
Mattapan, MA
617-983-8500 x6903
Gloria Villegas-Cardoza
Education Manager

Essential Question (goal):

As students from the Boston Public School, how does visiting an urban sanctuary to walk, observe, and draw nature, allow for comfort in an otherwise unfamiliar landscape?

Outcomes (objectives):

1. Students will walk the two miles of trails and boardwalks covering meadows and wetlands observing this natural environment including wildlife.
2. Students will understand the significance of a “green” building.
3. Students will come to appreciate the efforts necessary to create and sustain the oldest and largest community garden in Boston.
4. Students will observe closely the nature around them, identifying at least three wildflowers, shrubs, trees or grasses.
5. Students will choose one example of from their identification and draw from careful observation.
6. As a class, students and the teacher will choose a site on the grounds of the Boston Nature Center to present student choreography from their next lesson.

Content (concept):

Students will be given a tour of the Boston Nature Center—Mass Audubon Sanctuary with an in-depth discussion of the meaning of a “green” building—“teaching environmentally sustainable design by example.” Students will be asked: What efforts could you make to help sustain the environment? What was your first reaction upon being at the Boston Nature Center? How do you feel being in a place so incredibly different from your usual habitat? What does it feel like being in the ‘wild’, yet so very close to the city?

Motivational strategies:

Students will walk the trails observing their surroundings; identifying at least three wildflowers, shrubs, trees, or grasses and choosing one to draw realistically. Students will be supplied with clipboards, paper (plain and graph), pencils, and colored pencils.

Assessment: (20 %)

In a large group discussion students will share both their three identifications and the one realistic drawing. Their realistic drawing will be displayed in a classroom setting at the Center. Under each drawing will be an envelope with the students' name. Every student will go around to each drawing writing an anonymous positive comment and putting it into each envelope. An example would be; I like how you shaded in the leaves. This is a wonderful way to assess students who may or may not be art students. Additionally, a discussion will be led on the **Essential Question**.

Frameworks;

Visual Arts—these are dance students, so the understanding and application of these standards are not the same as if they were in an art class.

Connection Strand: Earth Science.

A Site Specific Dance Study on Nature Inspired by the Words of Thoreau

Essential Question (goal):

How can a site specific dance study on nature, inspired by the words of Thoreau, performed on the grounds of the Boston Nature Center, create comfort for urban youth in an otherwise unfamiliar landscape?

Outcomes (objectives):

1. Students will choose words or phrases from the writings of Thoreau to inspire them to choreograph a dance study of not less than two minutes.
2. Students will perform their own choreography on the grounds of the Boston Nature Center.
3. Students will be able to recognize the role of dance as a communicative device.
4. Students will be able to appreciate the heightened emotions achieved by performing at a site specific area.
5. Students will create their own appropriate costume.
6. Students will video tape each others' dance.
7. Students will present their video tape performance to a larger school audience and initiate a dialogue with the audience.

Motivational strategies:

Students will be given a large volume of works by Thoreau. They will be asked to choose words or phrases about nature that motivate them to move in particular ways, keeping in mind that the piece will be presented outdoors at a particular site. They may choose to do a narrative, but this is not required. This is a dance about nature; how it makes you feel, what memories or new experiences it evokes, and it should be a stepping stone to a wider experience. Some words must be incorporated into the sound track, however students may choose instrumental music to enhance the text. Students will work outside of the class and during class time. Discussion and assistance in the choreographic process will be ongoing.

Assessment: (60 %)

Students and teacher will develop a time line, setting specific time frame and expectations. Students will be assessed as choreographers and not as dancers. The final assessment will be conducted jointly with peers and teacher. Viewing of the video tape will be used for discussion and assessment.

Frameworks:

Dance: 1.18, 1.19, 1.23, 2.13, 2.14, 2.15, 3.9, 3.10, 3.14, 3.16, 5.4, 5.9, 5.10, 5.11, 5.12, 5.14

Connection Strand: English Language Arts

Name of Peer Evaluator _____

Date _____

**A Site Specific Dance Study on Nature
Inspired by the Words of Thoreau
Assessment**

1. Name of the choreographer _____

2. Describe the movements that evoked nature. _____

3. How did the words or phrases help you appreciate or understand the dance? _____

4. What surprised you about the dance? _____

5. If there was musical accompaniment, how did it compliment or detract from the dance?

Teacher comment: _____

Grade:

Writings on Nature _____

Boston Nature Center _____

(Nature drawing) _____

Site Specific Dance Study _____

_____ Final Grade

Bibliography

Fowler, Charles. Strong Arts, Strong Schools. New York: 1996.

http://www.massaudubon.org/Nature_Connection/Sanctuaries/Boston/index.php.

Thoreau, Henry D. Words for Nature Spirit, Wildness, and the Sublime in the Writings of Henry D. Thoreau. Comp. and Ed. Edmund A. Schofield. Worcester and Lincoln, Massachusetts: The Walden Woods Project, 2004. 10-15.

Tony. Personal interview. 22 July 2005.

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Dance at The English High School

The English High School is the oldest public high school (founded in 1821) in the United States. Although it is located in Jamaica Plain, it draws its 1200 students from all over the Boston area. The diverse student population represents more than forty countries; this is a very complex student body. For more than twenty years dance has been an elective for all students in grades 9 through 12.

Reflecting the Boston Public School Course Guide, the following classes are offered:

High School Dance I

This course is designed for a student with a desire to study dance, but has had no prior dance training.

High School Dance II

This course builds sequentially on High School Dance I and provides a student with opportunities to create, perform, observe, and respond to dance.

High School Dance Performance

This course builds on High School Dance I and II and provides a venue for those students pursuing more intense and rigorous dance training and expanded performance opportunities.

Because these classes are designed to reflect the developmental skills of students and not their grade level, the population of each class is comprised of mixed grades. The choreographic process required for this Unit would be best suited for students in High School Dance II or High School Dance Performance whose previous choreographic experience would enable them to successfully complete this advanced work. However, because only one dance course is being offered this year at EHS, they are combining all levels into one class. Hopefully the more advanced students will be able to assist the beginning students.

In this Unit assignments feed upon one another displaying various artistic means of expressing each student's interaction with Nature. The essential question for each lesson remains basically the same for the entire unit. "How do students of an urban high school, find comfort in an unfamiliar landscape through reading, writing, observing, drawing, choreographing, and dancing?"

Bibliography

Fowler, Charles. Strong Arts, Strong Schools. New York: 1996.

http://www.massaudubon.org/Nature_Connection/Sanctuaries/Boston/index.php.

Thoreau, Henry D. Words for Nature Spirit, Wildness, and the Sublime in the Writings of Henry D. Thoreau. Comp. and Ed. Edmund A. Schofield. Worcester and Lincoln, Massachusetts: The Walden Woods Project, 2004. 10-15.

Tony. Personal interview. 22 July 2005.



Photo: View from the Adams property at Walden Woods, July 2005