



American Studies

April 2006

Lesson Plans

The term American Studies encompasses a vast range of disciplines, all of which address aspects of American life. American Studies explores these themes through literature, art, pop culture, music, and a variety of academic disciplines.

Central topics in American Studies are American diversity, work, politics, and popular culture. In recent years some American Studies programs have also incorporated comparative studies of Canada and Latin America.

In this newsletter we offer a selection of American Studies lesson plans.

A Dictionary of Democracy	2
Famous Americans	3
<i>Three Lessons In United States History and Government</i>	4
Why Republican Government?	4
Why Do We Need a Government?	6
What Responsibilities Accompany Our Rights?	8

A Dictionary of Democracy

Students create a dictionary of terms for citizens of a democracy using events and biographies from their state's history and U.S. history.

What You Need

- Dictionaries
- Historical reference works (textbooks, biographies, state histories)
- Stapler or other means of binding pages

What to Do

1. Write some of the following terms on the chalkboard:

independence
Congress
election
representative
senator
governor
constitution
equal rights

2. Tell students that they are going to create a "dictionary of democracy" by defining words that are important to good citizenship, such as the ones on the chalkboard. Tell them they will then write a one- or two-paragraph example, or brief, from their nation's or the state's history to illustrate the use and meaning of the words. For example, in defining "independence," they might include the first few lines of the Declaration of Independence or describe how Sam Houston helped Texas gain its independence from Mexico.
3. With the class, brainstorm to add other words to the list on the board, including words that can be illustrated by examples from state history. Divide the list among the participating students so that each has no more than two. (If it is necessary to have more than one student be responsible for the same term, have them work together to provide more than one brief to support it.)
4. Students should then write the terms, the dictionary definitions, and the brief neatly on sheets of paper of the same size. Students may also enjoy illustrating their terms. Choose one student to create a durable cover for the dictionary pages, then bind all entries together (in alphabetical order) for the library or classroom.

Teaching Options

- Encourage students, individually or in groups, to present their briefs as dramatizations. This might be in the form of an excerpt from a speech (for example, Martin Luther King, Jr.'s, "I Have a Dream" speech to represent "equal rights"), a re-enactment of a historic event, or a reading of a letter, journal, or other primary source.

Have students interpret some of the terms from diverse viewpoints -- for example, Native Americans and Europeans, men and women, Anglo settlers and Mexican rulers, plantation owners and enslaved workers.

Famous Americans

Level: Elementary (early grades)

Materials Required: Internet access, and teacher-created outlines to guide the student

Activity Time: 3 - 45 minute block

Concepts Taught: Using the Internet to research a famous American, write a report, and do an oral presentation

Overview:

Students will research a famous American using the Internet and write a report on him/her

Time:

Three 45 minute blocks

Background:

As part of the third grade curriculum (age 8), students are required to do research. There is teacher guidance as this is a new concept for most third graders. Students will have the opportunity to research, work with an outline, and hand write a report following teacher guidelines.

Materials:

- Access to the Internet
- Outline for researching information (provided by teacher)
- Outline for writing report (provided by teacher)
- Pencil
- Paper

Procedure:

1. Students will be randomly assigned a famous American to research
2. Students will research their person online or using other available resources.
3. Students should print or write out all important information pertaining to their person.
4. Students need to fill out outline given by teacher to fill out (see attached).
5. Using George Washington as an example, teacher will write own report to show students step-by-step how to write it. She will also provide students with a guide for writing their report (see attached).
6. Students will then write a rough draft report and go over it with teacher.
7. Students will write final copy.
8. Students will present an oral presentation

Three Lessons In United States History and Government

Why Republican Government?

This lesson introduces students to thoughts, which will help you understand why the founders of the United States believed a republican form of government was best. You will learn about civic virtue and the common welfare.

The founding fathers studied history

The founders of the United States studied the history of governments. They were very interested in what they read about the government of the Roman Republic. It was located in what is now the country of Italy. The Roman Republic existed more than 2,000 years before our nation began.

The founders of the United States liked what they read about the Roman Republic. They learned some important ideas from their study of the government of ancient Rome. They used some of these ideas when they created our government.

What is a republican form of government?

The government of Rome was called a republican government. The founders of the United States read that republican government was one in which **the power of government is held by the people**. The people give power to leaders they elect to represent them and serve their interests. The representatives are responsible for helping all the people in the country, not just a few people.

Terms to Know

- representatives
- freedom
- prosperity
- fairness
- common welfare
- republican government
- interests
- civic virtue

Advantages of a republican government

The founders of the United States thought a **republican government** was the best kind of government they could choose for themselves. They believed that the advantages of republican government were:

- **Fairness.** They believed that laws made by the representatives they elected would be fair. If their representatives did not make fair laws, they could elect others who would.
- **Common welfare.** The laws would help everyone instead of one person or a few favored people.
- **Freedom and prosperity.** People would have greater freedom and be able to live well.

What is the common welfare?

When a government tries to help everyone in a country, we say it is serving the **common welfare**. The common welfare is what is good for everyone in the country, not just a few people.

Problem Solving

How do you decide what the common welfare is? When should you give up your own interests to do something that is good for everyone? Each person has to answer this question for himself or herself.

The following exercise will help you do this.

Work in groups of about three to five students. Each group should discuss the following questions. Be prepared to explain your group's answers to the class.

1. Describe a situation in which you think you should try to help others instead of just doing what you want for yourself.
2. Explain a situation in which you *think* you should do something for yourself instead of trying to help others.
3. Sometimes people disagree about what is the best thing for everyone. Describe a situation where this might happen. How do you think such disagreements should be settled?
4. Describe some things your government does to help everyone in the country. What other things could your government do? Why?

What is Civic Virtue?

When you work to help others and promote the common welfare, you are showing civic virtue.

The founders of the United States thought civic virtue was important for a republican government. People with civic virtue are interested in having the government help all the people.

The founders thought it was necessary to teach children the importance of helping others. Young people learned about civic virtue in their homes, schools, and churches. Adults also heard about civic virtue from their religious and political leaders.

The founders thought a republican government would work in the United States. They believed most of the people had civic virtue. They thought the people would select leaders who would work for the common welfare.

Reviewing and Using the Lesson

1. What is republican government?
2. Define "common welfare." Give examples of how your school helps the common welfare
3. Define "civic virtue." Give examples of people with civic virtue in your school and community.
4. Where was civic virtue taught in early America?
5. Describe a situation in which your interests might conflict with the common welfare.
6. Explain these terms: republican government, representative, interests, common welfare, civic virtue.

Why Do We Need a Government?

This lesson introduces students to some of the basic ideas which were of great importance to the founders of the United States. Students will learn why they thought we need a government in the first place. Students will also learn how the founders believed governments should be set up and what they ought to do.

Terms to Know

- natural rights
- philosopher
- government
- absolute power
- state of nature
- consent
- social compact or social contract

Problem solving - identifying basic rights

Think of a right you believe all people should have. For example, you probably agree that everyone in the United States has the right to be protected from robbers and burglars. The belief that everyone should have this protection is shared by most people in the United States. We hear about it on television, in the newspaper, and in discussions.

Individually or in small groups, explain how you think rights like the one you have identified can be protected.

Defining natural rights

Most people in the American colonies believed that everyone had a right to life, liberty, and property. These rights were called **natural rights**. (Sometimes these are now called basic rights or fundamental rights.) The idea of natural rights means that all persons have these rights just because they are human beings. Everyone is born with these rights and they should not be taken away.

Many of the founders believed people receive these rights from God. Others believed that people have them just because it is natural for people to have them.

John Locke was a famous English philosopher. He lived from 1632 to 1704. He had written a book called *Two Treatises of Civil Government* (1690). In that book he wrote about natural rights. He said that the main purpose of government should be to protect the people's natural rights. He also said that kings should not have absolute power. They should not be able to deprive people of their natural rights. Many Americans had read Locke's book, and they agreed with what it said about government. Those who had not actually read Locke's book knew his ideas from newspapers, political pamphlets, church sermons, and discussions.

Protecting natural rights

Although people agreed on certain natural rights, they worried about how those rights could be protected. Locke and others thought about what life would be like in a situation where there was no government and no laws. They called this situation a state of nature. They were afraid that in a state of nature their rights would be taken away.

Problem solving - it's your turn to think like a philosopher.

Imagine what life might be like in a state of nature. Think what your classroom might be like if there were no rules. Think what might happen if the teacher didn't have the right to tell anyone what to do.

Work together in groups of about five to answer the following questions about such a situation. Then choose a person to explain your answers to the rest of the class. Then compare your answers with John Locke's which follow.

1. What might be the advantages and disadvantages of living in a state of nature?
2. What might happen to people's rights?
3. How might life be like for everyone?

Compare your list with John Locke's

You may have seen the same disadvantages in a state of nature that John Locke saw. Locke believed:

1. The stronger and smarter people might try to take away other people's lives, liberty, or property.
2. Weaker people might band together and take away the rights of the stronger and smarter people.
3. People would be unprotected and insecure.

The social compact

John Locke and other philosophers developed a solution to the problems that exist in a place without government. In a state of nature, people might feel free to do anything they want to do. However, their rights would not be protected and they would feel insecure.

Locke argued that people should agree with one another to give up some of their freedom in exchange for protection and security. They should consent to follow some laws in exchange for the protection that these laws would give them. This agreement is called a social compact or social contract. A social compact is an agreement people make among themselves to create a government to rule them and protect their natural rights. In this agreement the people consent to obey the laws created by that government.

Reviewing and using lesson 2

1. What is the purpose of government according to the natural rights philosophers?
2. Where does government get its right to govern, according to the natural rights philosophers?
3. What is a social compact? Do you think this is the best way to create a government? Why or why not?
4. What beliefs about rights were important to the American colonists?
5. What rights do you think people should have?

What Responsibilities Accompany Our Rights?

Suppose a state government does everything it can to protect your rights. Is this enough? Will your rights be protected? Do we have any responsibility to protect not only our own rights, but each other's as well?

In this lesson you will discuss some important questions about the responsibilities of citizens. You must develop your own answers to these questions.

Is a good constitution enough?

The founders of the United States planned our government carefully. They organized it so its powers were limited. They separated the powers of our government among three different branches. They balanced the powers among these branches. They provided ways each branch could check or limit the powers of the other branches. Finally, they added a Bill of Rights. The Bill of Rights now protects our rights from unfair treatment by our national, state, and local governments.

Some of the founders believed they had organized the government very well. They believed the way they planned the government was enough to make sure our rights and welfare would be protected.

Other founders did not agree. They did agree that the way the government was organized was very important. However, they believed that the government would only work well if there were good people running it. They also believed it would only succeed if the citizens were good citizens.

Today, most people agree. A well-written constitution is not enough to protect our rights. We need to elect leaders who will make and enforce laws that protect our rights and promote our welfare.

However, even a good constitution and good leaders may not be enough. If we want to protect our rights and welfare, we, the people, have certain responsibilities to fulfill. Let's examine what some of these responsibilities might be.

What responsibilities accompany our rights?

Most of us agree we all should have certain basic rights. For example, we all want the right to speak freely. We want the right to believe as we wish. We also want to be able to own property and to travel wherever we want to go. Is it fair to say that if we want these rights, we must also take on some responsibilities? Let's examine this question.

Problem solving - Can you have rights without responsibilities?

As you study basic rights please examine some of the responsibilities that go along with these rights. Your class should be divided into four groups. Each group could develop answers to the questions on one of the rights listed below. Then each group could report its findings to the class.

Group 1 - Freedom of expression

- Your state government can not unfairly limit your right to speak freely. What responsibilities might go along with this right?
- Suppose you attend a meeting of students in your school. The group is supposed to suggest rules for lunch break or on the playground. You have the right to speak and give your suggestions. What responsibilities should you have in the way you speak and in what you say? List and explain these responsibilities.
- What responsibilities should other students at the meeting have toward your right to speak? List and explain these responsibilities.
- What responsibilities should you have toward the other students' right to speak? List and explain these responsibilities.
- What might happen to the right to free speech if no one fulfilled the responsibilities you have discussed?

Group 2 - Freedom of religion

- Your state government cannot interfere with your right to believe as you wish. It cannot unfairly limit your right to practice your religious beliefs. What responsibilities might go along with these rights?
- Suppose you believe in a particular religion. You attend a church, worship in your home, or temple in your community. List and explain what responsibilities you should have in the way you practice your religious beliefs.

- Suppose there are people in your community who believe in different religions or in no religion at all. List and explain what responsibilities they should have to protect your right to practice your religious beliefs.
- List and explain what responsibilities you should have to protect other people's right to practice their religious beliefs or not to have any religious beliefs.
- What might happen to the right of freedom of religion if no one fulfilled the responsibilities you have discussed?

Group 3 - The right to be treated equally

- Your state government may not favor some people over others because of such things as their age, sex, race, or religion. What responsibilities might go along with this right?
- Suppose people in your community are planning a picnic for the public. List and explain what responsibilities they might have to be fair to you no matter what your age, sex, race, or religion may be.
- Suppose you were helping to plan the picnic. List and explain what responsibilities you think you should have to other people no matter what their age, sex, race, or religion might be.
- What might happen to the right to be treated equally if no one fulfilled the responsibilities you have discussed?

Group 4 - The right to be treated fairly by your state government

- Your state government must be fair to you when it is gathering information and making decisions. What responsibilities might go along with this right?
- Suppose someone has accused you of doing something wrong in your school or community. What responsibilities should that person have toward you? List and explain those responsibilities.
- Suppose you have accused others of doing something wrong in your school or community. What responsibilities should you have toward them? List and explain those responsibilities.
- What might happen to the right to be treated fairly if no one fulfilled the responsibilities you have discussed?