

Ahimsa Center K-12 Teacher Institute Lesson

Title:

Walk a Mile in My Shoes: An Experiment in Empathy

Lesson By:

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Grade Level/ Subject Areas:

9th – 12th Grade/ Art and History

Duration of Lesson:

Approximately 2 weeks (with room for more days if needed for challenge options)

Content Standards: State of California Standards for Visual and Performing Arts.

5.0 CONNECTIONS, RELATIONSHIPS, APPLICATIONS

5.2 Create a work of art that communicates a cross-cultural or universal theme taken from literature or history.

3.0 HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT

3.2 Identify contemporary artists worldwide who have achieved regional, national, or international recognition and discuss ways in which their work reflects, plays a role in, and influences present-day culture.

Lesson Abstract:

This project is designed to incorporate the teachings of Gandhi into the design and creation of a wearable piece of art to engage students in what it means to labor for the good of others. In order to understand self sufficiency (Swadeshi) and the welfare of all (Sarvodaya) Students will construct footwear for a classmate using recycled, found, and sustainable materials, and then be required to wear the footwear for an entire 24 hour period, culminating with a written reflection as well as a digital and physical exhibition of their sculptures.

Guiding Questions:

How can (Swadeshi) self-sufficiency, sustainability, and (Sarvodaya) the welfare of all affect our relationship to the modern world within the context of Gandhi? And how can understanding these concepts and working for the good of others generate empathy in ourselves and society as a whole?

Content Essay:

Teacher Resource Essay: On Swadeshi, Sarvodaya, and Empathy

Background and Historical Context

In any subject it is important that the students have some contextual background information about the subject matter they are going to be tackling. For this project I am using the teachings of Gandhi and to a lesser extent Cesar Chavez and their notions of nonviolence to engage students in the creation of a an art work/sculpture that occupies a space between sculpture and performance. An artwork, that I hope will have the capacity to not only enrich the student's selves, but instill in them the empathy and selflessness required to achieve what Gandhi referred to as Swaraj (Freedom).

1. Biographical Information

Born Mohandas K. Gandhi in India 1869 in the small region of Porbandar to a middle class family. His Mother, a devout Hindu and his father a local politician, Gandhi was essentially born into some degree of status amongst the strata of Indian culture.¹ From his parents, Gandhi will learn much that will go on to have a great impact on him as a person, thinker, and leader. More specifically, due to his Mother's tremendous faith and his Father's acceptance of many faiths and religions, Gandhi takes away a strong sense of acceptance of others and the thoughtful consideration of their views into his later years.

Traditionally Gandhi is thought of, or at least envisioned as the bespectacled, bald, frail old man, who wears only simple cloth. While this is indeed the most prevalent image we have of Gandhi it is important for the students to understand the reality of his early years to fully grasp the magnitude of the changes Gandhi makes in his life that lead him on the path to become a "Mahatma".

¹ Instructors wishing to delve deeper into the structure of the Indian class structure may wish to incorporate more information here in their lectures, handouts, etc.

Throughout his life Gandhi was ambitious. As a young man he left home to attend school in England where he became a Barrister (Lawyer). It is in England where Gandhi starts to idealize the English or “Modern” way of life. He adopts the hairstyle, clothing, and activities of an upper class “Englishmen” of the time. Taking on the learning of languages, perfecting his English, and violin.

It is however Gandhi’s time in South Africa after returning back to India from England that is most significant and transformative to creating the Gandhi we know of today as the leader and champion of a worldwide movement of Nonviolence. Gandhi the icon, is many things to many people. However, “While Gandhi is undoubtedly noteworthy for having played such roles, his greater significance, as discussed in this biography, lies in the ways in which he defined his goals, his position in these roles, and the means with which he strived to pursue his goals.” (Sethia 1)

For this particular project I would like to focus on two themes in Gandhi’s philosophy that I think are relevant to fostering empathy. Those notions are of Swadeshi (self-reliance) and Sarvodaya (welfare of all), which were part of a larger movement towards a free and independent India rooted in the philosophies of Ahimsa (nonviolence).

2. Swadeshi

For Gandhi, swadeshi was just one element in creating an independent and sustainable nation, and it relied upon getting the population to eschew modern machines and factories for locally produced goods and services. Essentially, having each individual helping the greater good by producing with their hands, what they are capable. This of course was rooted in his other ideas on truth and nonviolence, but is

summed up in his own words when writing about Ahimsa and his experiences in South Africa. “ I do not remember a single religious quarrel in the two colonies I founded in South Africa. The common labor consisted of printing, carpentry, shoe-making, gardening, house-building, and the like” (Gandhi)

It is through this “Bread Labor” that Gandhi believed he could sustain his experiments in truth and nonviolence. He goes on to say the following with regard to labor,

“Thirty-four years of continuous experience and experimenting in truth and non-violence have convinced me that non-violence cannot be sustained unless it is linked to conscious body-labor² and finds expression in our daily contact with our neighbors. This is the constructive program. It is not an end, it is an indispensable means and therefore is almost convertible with the end. The power of nonviolent resistance can only come from honest working of the constructive program.” (Gandhi)³

This passage is particularly poignant for students today who are inundated with advertisements about all sorts of material goods, from the latest and greatest Nike shoes, to the hottest new video game. These increases in modern culture and the speed and number of times with which these ideas are communicated are precisely what Gandhi was addressing when he writes Hind Swaraj. According to Gandhi, it’s our disconnection from our bodies via machines and technology that isolate us from ourselves, ultimately creating a society of self-centered individuals.

Without delving too deeply on Gandhi’s notion of modernity in this paper, I do want to address the notion of machinery and how through the notion of how machinery is used; we can facilitate growth and understanding in our students. Firstly, in Hind

² This section of the quote is a great starting point for instructors using hands on projects to discuss different types of labor and to discuss the notion in Gandhi’s writings that all labor is valuable and equal.

³ I think this previous statement is an excellent quote to have the students read and discuss in small groups as it raises some interesting questions about what it means to labor for the benefit of others.

Swaraj, Gandhi is extremely critical of machines and technology. Later however he elaborates on several occasions and in writings to make more clear his ideas. I think this quote from 1947 explains a key point on machinery and capitalism. “Machine-power can make a valuable contribution towards economic progress. But a few capitalists have employed machine-power regardless of the interests of the common man and that is why our condition has deteriorated today.” (Parel 168)⁴

3. Sarvodaya

I feel that this lesson, with regard to swadeshi is incomplete unless we discuss Gandhi’s notion of sarvodaya or welfare for all in conjunction with the previous ideas on self-reliance and sustainability. According to the biographies, Gandhi’s ideas on sarvodaya (compassion for all) stem from the reading of Henry Ruskin’s *Unto This Last* (1860) while on a train from Johannesburg to Durban South Africa.

Here are some of the immediate and important things Gandhi took from the book. “ (1) That the good of the individual is contained in the good of all. (2) That a lawyer’s work has the same value as the barber’s, inasmuch as all have the same right of earning their livelihood from their work. (3) That a life of labor, i.e., the life of the tiller of the soil and the handicraftsman, is the life worth living. The first of these I knew. The second I had dimly realized. The third had never occurred to me.” (Parel lii)

It is these points that I feel best represent sarvodaya under the context that Gandhi was using the term. Ruskin’s and Gandhi’s interpretation of Ruskin are interesting ideas to contrast with that of pure socialism and communism, as neither man was looking to keep an individual from making money, but they envisioned a system

⁴ This is a good area to delve deeper into economic systems with regard to capitalism and labor for teachers of history and government, etc.

where the motivation for the work of an individual could come from a moral place, a place of selflessness. Ultimately is Gandhi's notion of sarvodaya that is paramount in his writing of Hind Swaraj and his plans to get Britain out of India in a way that did not leave India repeating the mistakes of their colonizer. Or to put it into Gandhi's words "“English rule without the Englishmen...the tiger's nature but not the tiger;” (Sethia 89)

The aforementioned topics represent of course, only the tip of the iceberg with regards to the topics available that are applicable to the teachings of Gandhi. They are however an important start for students to get an understanding of just how important Gandhi's work was in the historical context, as well as applied to their daily lives.

Bibliography

Gandhi, Mohandas K. “Excerpt from "Ahimsa In Practice"." Gandhi, Mohandas K. Ahimsa in Practice. Harijan, 1940.

Iyer, Raghavan. “Truth and Nonviolence.” Hermes (1988): 8.

Parel, Anthony J. Gandhi: Hind Swaraj and Other Writings. Ed. Anthony J. Parel. Centenary. Cambridge University Press, 2010.

Sethia, Tara. “http://www.csupomona.edu/~ahimsacenter/ahimsa_hst433.shtml.” Gandhi: Pioneer of Nonviolent Social Change. .pdf. Prod. Tara Sethia. 2011 й и л 29-July.

Teaching Activities/ Materials Needed:

Activities.

- KWL (Know, Want to Know, and Learned) exercise day one. In small groups have students construct a sheet of paper with three columns with labels K, W, L. Have prepared a projection or powerpoint that has images of Gandhi, quotes, important information etc. Use the first 10 minutes to have the students in their groups writing down everything they know in the column K, and everything they want to know in the W column, followed by what they are learning from their peers in column L.
- Allow groups to share out to start discussion, encouraging students to continue to add to the L column in order to foster good dialogue and to aid in their research.

- Hand out project launch sheet, which should consist of timelines, expectations, etc.
- Student led research. Compile any additional resources and texts as suggestions and let the students start to research the topics.
- Ideally, create a model of the project, in this case the shoes that you made or past students have made so the students can see exactly what it is you are looking for.
- Procure supplies, rubber, cloth, string, webbing, etc. for this project the students should only be using recycled, up-cycled, materials to the best of their ability.
- Safety and use of tools. Spend 1 day introducing the safe use of power and hand tools in the construction of the shoes and continue to monitor for safety.
- After completing the work, students will wear the shoes for a 24 hour period and then be required to reflect on the experience of making shoes for someone and the wearing of shoes made by someone they know etc.
- Challenge option for students is to wear the shoes for a one-week period and create a journal or blog about the experience.
- Culminating event is in the performative wearing of the shoes/sculptures, but may also consist of an exhibition of the shoes and documentation of the making of the shoes, in conjunction to their journals/blogs.