

Nonconformists & Upstanders: Taking Action for Change

Summary

This mini-unit is intended to piggyback on 8th grade study of the Civil War. Students will look at biographical sketches of people who took a stand and took action for social change or resisted against societal expectations. Looking at their own experience, they will determine characteristics of people who were able to successfully resist oppression or change their circumstances.

Time Frame

5 class periods of 45 minutes each

Group Size

Small Groups

Life Skills

Thinking & Reasoning, Communication, Character

Materials

Copies of the attachments below for your students. Some may be used in small groups, or individually, depending on how you decide to do the activities.

Background for Teachers

8th graders are in the midst of figuring out who they are and deciding whether to blend in and conform or be true to who they are. These activities are intended to help students learn about people who stood up for what they believed and didn't conform to thinking of the time. Today, nearly 150 years after the Civil War and the Emancipation Proclamation, we see slavery for the evil it was. But at the time, people had radically different views about slavery. Plantation owners saw slavery as an economic necessity. Abolitionists wanted to end it because of the cruelty that they saw in the system. Many slaves wanted to escape from the harsh and inhumane circumstances they were forced to be in. At great personal risk, slaves and abolitionists worked to change the system. This same kind of resistance to the status quo can be seen in the Jewish (and non-Jewish) resistance to the Holocaust. Although students don't specifically study the Holocaust in 8th grade, they may have some background on the period and the circumstances and resistance have some interesting parallels to the Underground Railroad and abolitionist activities at the time of the Civil War. Use this background as you talk about "resistance" and being an "upstander" --being true to what you believe in.

Student Prior Knowledge

It is assumed that students have some previous experience with the Civil War and slavery, whether from their elementary experience or more recently in their current studies of US History.

Intended Learning Outcomes

Students will predict and examine reasons why people don't often resist or break free of the accepted norm or status quo and why others do. They will consider risks and consequences people face in standing up for what they believe to be right (physical, social, emotional, political). In the process of wrestling with that big idea, they will learn features of information text, encounter and use primary source documents, use secondary source documents, make connections with historical text and their experience today, and participate in a Socratic Seminar.

Instructional Procedures

Adjust times as needed; some activities may need two days instead of one depending on the length of your class period and learner readiness and interest. DAY ONE: DEFINITIONS • Use Janet Allen's vocabulary organizer from *Words, Words, Words* to flesh out what a "nonconformist" is. If you do not have access to her book, create a web. Look at etymology. Think of synonyms and antonyms for the word; add examples and non-examples. What does a nonconformist DO (action verbs, here). The goal is to come to a definition of what a nonconformist is and isn't. You may consider using the Visual Thesaurus available through the Pioneer Online Library. It doesn't really matter what approach you use as long as the "definition" you are working with is more than what a kid copy from a dictionary. Looking there is a good start, but I want students to experience the richness of language. • Divide the students into small groups (3-5). Have them think of characters in movies or television (or people in modern popular culture) and classify them as conformists or nonconformists. Make a list in a basic T-chart. Be sure to have students justify their choices. Share some as a class looking for overlap, agreement and possibly some disagreement. (Are there maybe characters that are both depending on the circumstances?) DAY TWO: PREDICTIONS & A SECONDARY SOURCE • Next let students self-select into different groups based on interest and self-determined background knowledge about slavery in the U.S. OR the Holocaust of WWII OR another similar historical event. Once in their groups, have them consider these questions: * Looking at your time period, predict reasons why people--at that time--didn't resist? (In other words, Why didn't MORE people stand up and say: "This is wrong.") * Does your group know of anyone (an individual or a group) that DID resist at that time? How did they resist? Why did THEY resist? * How do you think CHANGE occurred? (Or, why did slavery eventually end or how did the outside world finally find out about the Holocaust?) Report your group's thinking in the 3-column "Predicting and Reasoning about Resistance" chart. • Armed with these background activities, ALL students will now explore 2 websites. The information in these websites is first rate, but the purpose of this part of the unit is not just to acquire more background information. The goal is to guide students through how to read texts like this (particularly primary source documents) that they may not have a lot of experience with. For example, in the "Resistance during the Holocaust" PDF pamphlet, have the students examine the pictures on the cover and the first inside page. What do they notice? (I was interested to notice that there are women in the cover shot. Also, I didn't think the man with the glasses standing in the middle of the three on the second page looked like what I expected a "resister" to look like. Let students take time to REALLY look at what is there and perhaps to comment on what surprises them or interests them.) While this pamphlet is a SECONDARY source, it uses primary sources (photographs and quotes/excerpts) as well. Guide them through some of the reading, and then let them go on their own. • The first website to go to is called "Resistance during the Holocaust." Cue the students to look for reasons presented here for why many people did not resist (obstacles). Look at the photographs. What do they notice? What surprises them? Read the introduction together. Explain how secondary sources are when someone looks at primary sources (photographs, diaries, newspapers of the time, interviews, etc.) and then synthesizes them. After reading the introduction together, point out the primary text that is inserted from Izik Sutin to reinforce the difference between primary and secondary sources. • Let the students read pages 5-7 ("Obstacles to Resistance") on their own, noting reasons for why resistance was so difficult. After reading, you may want to point out to them some of the text features that help with the reading (bolded text that you can easily skim back through to locate; space between paragraphs, etc.). • Then go to the website on the Jewish Resistance where students can read/hear stories of resisters (a blend of primary and secondary sources, but they can see and hear some of the people telling their stories in their own words.) • If time today, have them go back to their 3-column chart where they made predictions about why people didn't resist much. (If not, be sure to check back tomorrow.) Did their predictions match the facts of the text? Did they have any that were on the right track? Which ones surprised them or didn't occur to them? DAY THREE: INFERENCES & PRIMARY

SOURCES • Today, students are exploring a completely different set of documents at the website called "Pathways to Freedom." Once students arrive at this site, there is an introduction ("Steal Away") in the main body of the page. Look at this together. (Talk about introductions and their purpose, since we looked at one yesterday, as well. You might even compare the two introductions because their PURPOSE is different.) Is it a primary or secondary source? • Let students pick and choose among the six names in the upper right corner. They should read about at least 2 of the people. (You may want to jigsaw groups and assign 2 people to each of 3 students, then they can collaborate and share their findings later.) When you click on a name, the new page has a brief biographical introduction. Click on "Go to the Interactive" to get to the primary source text: an account that usually comes from the person's autobiography. (This site is VERY interactive. You can listen to the account read aloud and follow along. The column to the left of the account has questions answered by the account. As you scroll over the text, answers are highlighted. There are a variety of things you can do with the site besides what we are doing as part of this unit.) • Have students keep track of factors that influenced the person's decision to escape. • Have students compare and contrast these factors with the reasons given for not resisting in the Holocaust pamphlet. (Students will have to do a little bit of generalizing here since the factors don't word-to-word correlate. Look at how the idea of FAMILY may have influenced them, for example. See if they can make other generalization or notice similarities.) • Tying it together: Have students think about if they were in either of these circumstances. Which factors would be the most difficult for them to overcome? Or, in other words, which factors would maybe keep them from resisting? (Response could be in a small group discussion, a whole class discussion pulling everyone together for some debriefing, or in a written journal entry or artistic interpretation. **DAY FOUR: WHAT DOES THIS HAVE TO DO WITH US TODAY?** • Ask students to consider how what they've learned in the past couple of days could possible have to do with them today. You can prompt them with • Show the YouTube video called "Upstanders: Portraits in Courage." (If you can't show the video because of district restrictions, use the transcript of key quotes. **DAY FIVE: SOCRATIC SEMINAR** on what it means to be a nonconformist and resister. • If you are unfamiliar with how a Socratic Seminar works, check out the web link provided and/or do a search on the Internet. There is a lot of information available. • Possible questions to consider during the seminar: o Is being a nonconformist (or a conformist, for that matter) GOOD or BAD? Why? o Which characteristics of nonconformists do you most admire? o What are some "problematic" characteristics of nonconformists? o Who do you know (or view) as a nonconformist or upstander who is working for change? Do you agree or disagree with what they are trying to do? o From the readings you did about the Underground Railroad and the Holocaust, what about the experience of the resisters stays with you? What won't you forget? **FINAL PROJECT:** Have students do one of the following: 1) Think about what you are passionate about or believe strongly (see yourself as an "Upstander"). Write a PROPOSAL explaining what you envision doing about the problem or concern. Define the problem you see. Make a list of possible actions to address or improve the problem. Do you need help from organizations or volunteers? How do envision your action could improve your family, school, community, world? 2) Nominate someone you know (in the school or community) that you consider to be an "upstander." What has this person done (or are they currently doing) that qualifies them to be considered an upstander? How do you know this person? What good has come from their choice to act and make a difference? The final product should be a detailed and professional application NOMINATION, not a journal entry.

Strategies for Diverse Learners

The websites themselves help accommodate reading abilities (and even visual handicaps) because the text can be listened to as well as read. Be aware of needs as students work in small groups.

Extensions

1) Do a similar vocabulary exercise as done with "nonconformist" with the word "resist" or "resister".
2) Read or listen to "This I Believe" essays from National Public Radio. See what other people believe in--passionately. As an alternative assignment, have students write (and SPEAK) their own "This I Believe" essays. Guidelines are provided at the website. 3) Use Jamie McKenzie's "Biography Maker" to scaffold biographical research on nonconformists of the students' choice who changed the world (preferably for the better). See link under websites. 4) Other potential historical & current contexts: Japanese Internment Camps (and refusing to be drafted as protest); Civil Rights movements (American or International); War in Iraq: Lt. Ehren Watada's refusal to deploy to Iraq; Women's Rights; etc. 5) To model a Socratic seminar, invite teachers who might be on their prep, the principal, secretary, and other staff (and/or parents) to participate in a model discussion, perhaps using questions that address similar ideas to the unit. Hopefully students will see what civil adult discourse looks and sounds like (listening to each other, asking questions for clarification, attempting to understand or make meaning, respectfully disagreeing, etc.). It might extend their understanding of the subject matter/theme as well.

Assessment Plan

Things to assess in this unit: participation & engagement with other students (observed: see Rubric for Nonachievement Factors below); recognition of primary and secondary sources (informal); WRITING TO LEARN: either through journaling or some kind of "exit" activity, give students the opportunity to explain their understanding by synthesizing information about nonconformity (after doing the vocabulary exercise), about reasons for people "resisting" or "escaping" (after examining websites about the Underground Railroad and the Holocaust), and about upstanders. Participation in Socratic Seminar (see website for rubrics). FINAL PROJECTS (proposal or nomination).

Rubrics

[Rubric for Nonachievement Factors](#)

Bibliography

Authors

[Heather Baker](#)