

Human Rights – A Visual Exploration

Ubuntu – “I am what I am because of who we all are.”

Some History On How We Got To Where We Are Going – Language Arts Component

Ubuntu is a South African way of life. It is the cultural acknowledgement of the community living together and being responsible for each other. It has also been the central theme for our study of Language Arts in my classroom this year.

To connect our students to both their community and the outside world, I have focused my curriculum units on Ubuntu, an exploration of what makes us unique as individuals and the greater, common bonds that tie us together as people. In Language Arts, we have spent the first six weeks of the school year exploring themes of prejudice and choices in South African literature and politics as a comparison to the South during the height of the Civil Rights movement. We read South African folktales and legends, collected while we were in South Africa, and created musical and visual accompaniments to these stories. The themes from the stories centered on evaluating the choices made by the characters. Were the individual decisions the characters made good for the community? How did they impact the future of the community and individual? How did the stories exhibit Ubuntu as a cultural phenomenon?

After laying the foundation for a discussion on the balance between community and individuality, we extended our themes into an analysis of the movie *Sarafina* and a discussion of Apartheid in South Africa. My experiences in South Africa were tantamount to this unit. I understood so much more behind the violence and torture from both sides and played for my students interviews I'd conducted with South Africans who'd lived through that time as well as shared photographs and documents from the memorials I'd visited like the District Six museum, the South African museum, and a “people produced” memorial in a neighborhood called Athlone where three children were gunned down in an unprovoked attack. We read the Truth and Reconciliation statements taken by the caretakers of these children and my students responded in their journals. As part of the unit, we also read non-fiction pieces by Nelson Mandela and connected them to narratives from heroes of the Civil Rights movement including Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King, Jr. as well as a memoir of a child's experience with racial prejudice in Southern America during the 1950's. From these pieces, the students composed a cumulative evaluative essay defining their personal hero based on the characteristics of defending what is right, personal sacrifice, compassion for others, and other characteristics embodied by Nelson Mandela and others.

For the second six weeks, with the election looming large, we explored argumentative writing (in accordance with our school and state curriculum) by analyzing the political processes in democracies around the world. We focused on America, but I made specific links and provided examples from South Africa's recent racially equal elections. Obama's obvious link to Africa with his Kenyan-born father and his experiences growing up in Indonesia allowed for good discussions about cultural understanding and the way Americans are viewed around the world. I was able to provide personal experiences based on my recent trip as to how South Africans viewed our electoral process and our potential president. We compared the candidates to our “hero” criteria from the previous unit and analyzed their campaign slogans and

commercials. We also read letters from Nelson Mandela to the American youth written in 1997 about the importance of participating in the political process. Having a much greater background knowledge of this great leader gave significance to his words. On Election Day, students participated in KidsVoteUSA and read a children's story "The Day Gogo Went to Vote", a book I purchased while in South Africa, about an elderly woman voting for the first time in her own country. Students also compared the children's story to a non-fiction article written by Nelson Mandela about his voting experience in 1997. Again, having a deep understanding of the struggles of South Africa to get to the point where all people could have the right to let their voices be counted, my students responded particularly well to the unit, gaining a deeper understanding of the dangers of apathy and the power of Ubuntu. For a culminating activity, the students wrote and typed an essay proposing a specific solution to local, community problem like pollution in a local creek and budget cuts for schools.

For the third six weeks, we are continuing with our theme of Ubuntu by exploring literature with the theme of prejudice. The 1960's Twilight Zone episode "The Monsters Are Due on Maple Street," Dickens's "A Christmas Carol," and other literature we are reading loops back to evaluation of the choices characters make as individuals tied to a community. We are also creating a Public Service Announcement to sell an "idea" like working together to build a better society and innovation to solve problems. Students have based their ideas on web commercials like the Dove campaign for Real Beauty, FreeRice, and (my personal favorite) the XO Laptop Give One, Get One drive. We viewed and analyzed Zimi's story on the XO site, a little girl I am confident lives in South Africa. The students responded particularly well to her video after having watched videos, seen pictures, and read letters from the students we worked with in South Africa. I also brought in the XO Laptop I bought last year and took to South Africa with me to show them what Zimi could do with her laptop. The phrase, "Our real problem is access to education. With education we can solve our own problems," sparked a serious discussion with the students about the rights of individuals to things like education, food, clean water, and security as well as the necessity of individuals to work together to make those things possible in a society. When fears and doubts and greed (as exhibited by the characters in the literature we are reading) interfere with the choices people make, many, many people suffer. So, I am asking my students, what "idea" do you think people need to hear to keep things in balance?

That is where we are going next with our project called Human Rights – A Visual Exploration. We have purchased Flip cameras in preparation for this project and are talking with people in our community to help us. But I'll let Alex continue with an actual description of the project.

Human Rights—A Visual Exploration, Social Studies Component

Materials: Student-created multimedia presentations (powerpoint video slides with musical accompaniment, produced in Windows Movie Maker)

Copies of UN Declaration of Universal Human Rights

Youtube/Teachertube videos for classroom display and reference (in particular “The Human Rights Project” and other such examples)

Competency Goals/Objectives Addressed:

Competency Goal 5--The learner will evaluate the varied ways people of Africa, Asia, and Australia make decisions about the allocation and use of economic resources.

Competency Goal 6—The learner will assess the connections between historical events and contemporary issues in Africa, Asia, and Australia.

Competency Goal 7—The learner will assess the influence and contributions of individuals and cultural groups in Africa, Asia, and Australia.

Competency Goal 10—The learner will compare the rights and civic responsibilities of individuals in political structures in Africa, Asia, and Australia.

Competency Goal 12--The learner will assess the influence of major religions, ethical beliefs, and values on cultures in Africa, Asia, and Australia.

Background:

Throughout the year, students have been studying Africa. We have explored the continent’s history, cultures, climate zones, and major imports/exports. Students have simultaneously been studying the rich history of its governments and social structures through exercises and literature projects in their Language Arts class. In addition, we have been exploring the history of such human rights violations as Apartheid in South Africa, and the slave trade in Africa’s early history. In the next grading period, students will be moving to a study of Asia, and part of their study will focus on defining and understanding the concepts of human rights and the various large-scale violations of those rights that history is rife with.

Procedure:

Beginning after Christmas, students will be putting together their own visual exploration of particular human rights violation. Some examples of topics students will be able to choose from are:

1. The crisis in Darfur
2. The history of Apartheid
3. The child warriors of Sierra Leone
4. The AIDS/HIV epidemic (particularly the limited access to medications and education)
5. Child labor/”sweat shops”
6. China’s suppression of information

Although the topics will span history, students will be encouraged to focus on modern examples. The student projects will be two-fold:

1. Research:

Students will choose a particular topic on Human Rights violations and research its history—what makes it a human rights violation? What events led up to it? What was the response of the world, if any? How was the situation resolved or addressed by the global community?

Students will produce a research paper detailing the situation, as well as analyze the solution to the situation. Students will research various charities and advocacy groups that are working towards a resolution of the situation. If there was no satisfactory resolution, students will be asked to propose their own solution, involving the global community.

2. Visual Presentation:

Students will then create a visual presentation that tells the story of their topic in a compressed time period (for reference--as we will be encouraging students to create projects that use words, music, and text to convey the story of the situation—I will be showing two popular music videos—Sarah McLachlan’s ‘World On Fire’ and Nickelback’s ‘If Everyone Cared’)

Presentations must be confined to ten minutes, including a short introduction with a summary of the facts of the situation and time for a short Q & A period.

3. Community Presentation:

Students will then present their projects to a community audience. We are currently exploring the possibility of having the community movie theater show presentations on one of their screens. If that is not possible, students will present at the school, to parents and invited members of the community.

As a final point to the project, the presentation will have a fundraising element—ie, a spaghetti dinner or 50/50 raffle. Part of the student presentation will have to include a persuasive argument as to why the proceeds should be donated to a charity or advocacy group that they have researched. The audience will vote on the best presentation/argument at the end of the night, with the fundraising proceeds going to the winning group’s selected advocacy group.