

Lesson and Assessment Ideas

I am not one to use lesson plans in the traditional way--because of this I won't post them in a standard "Lesson Plan" template, complete with objectives, alignment to standards, materials, etc. One reason for this is because my mind doesn't work in such templates. Another reason is that I believe each teacher develops her own template and doesn't need that from me. Finally, and most practically, I simply wouldn't post enough if I put too many barriers in my way. My objective is to share ideas and then let teachers run with them in their own way. If I required myself to complete a full lesson template, I don't think I'd keep up with it very well!

So please remember: these are ideas to help you get started.

Economics:

- 1. Economic Systems:** After learning about Adam Smith (free market), Karl Marx (command), and traditional economies students should compare the *values* of each system. We frequently compare the logistics and the key economic questions but it's important to look into what each system values about human beings.
- 2. Assessing the Free Market System:** After learning about the free market system (or reading Adam Smith, or the circular flow model) facilitate a discussion: Adam Smith describe the nature of economic behavior and people in their natural state, but does that mean the system *ought to* reflect that nature? There are many cases where we develop systems or laws to counteract humans' natural selfish drive. Ought we to do that in economics?
- 3. Microlending:** when teaching a unit on banking, interest rates, lending, etc. teach about microlending. Focus on institutions like Grameen Bank or KIVA. Read Amartya Sen or Mahbub ul Haq. This is a completely different banking paradigm and can be used to teach about the purpose of banking. It can also be a way to get into development economics.
- 4. What do the Wealthy Owe to Society?:** It has been said that economic systems don't account for moral obligations at all. The market has no conscience. However, is it true that the wealthy owe nothing to society? Aside from following the law, do the wealthy have a duty to give back? A duty to pay higher taxes? What impact might this have on the economy and, if it does have an affect, does that matter? This question can be asked of people, to nations, and to monopolies.

Government/Civics:

- 1. Protecting the Minority:** To what extent do we protect the minority in a government system? There are many cases of individuals giving up their rights for the good of the whole. In many of these cases, the individual's rights are completely trumped by society. Use Utilitarian ethics to evaluate the extent to which we sacrifice the individual for the good of the

whole. Or use African Communalism (or traditional Chinese Communalism) to look at other alternatives--where individual rights don't have the same importance that they do in US democracy.

2. **Lincoln and Habeas Corpus:** Lincoln said "more rogues than honest men find shelter behind habeas corpus." Is this a reason to suspend habeas corpus? Should we ever?

3. **Court Cases:** There are a myriad of court cases one can use to discuss moral issues. Remember to debate them not always around legal issues but around issues of ethics or values.

4. **The Vote:** Does everyone deserve the right to vote? Can representatives work for you, even though you didn't vote for them? What is "virtual representation?" Do adolescents have proper representation? Should we lower the voting age?

5. **The Common Good over Individual Gain:** It has been said that we have lost a sense of virtue in our political system. This lesson idea can focus on current politicians, or historical figures: find examples of political decisions, policies, etc. and evaluate the extent to which the politician made a decision for personal gain or the common good. This leads to a good discussion about what the role of the politician should be.

History:

Many history lessons can be easily adapted based on the era or part of the world you're studying. Remember: ethics can be content neutral and thus can be adapted quite easily.

1. **The American Revolution:** Were the colonists justified in using violence to gain independence? Might they have used other means? In this lesson, students could study the literature and the demonstrations of the era and assess the extent to which they were working to convince Britain to give up the colonies.

2. **Character Assessments:** You can do any number of character assessments of historical figures. You could phrase it as their "Day of Reckoning." By assessing their character, you are dabbling in virtue ethics, which judges not simply actions, but people in the context of their whole life. This would force the students to consider all of their actions, both good and bad, and give weight to them. You could also do character assessments of countries, movements, or schools of thought.

3. **Shi Huangdi and Chairman Mao:** You could do this for any number of world leaders, but my colleagues and I have done this specific comparison with some success. By comparing these two, students can learn about what the Chinese have historically valued in leadership. Of course, these two leaders were highly questionable and this discussion could lead to all sorts of conversations about the ethics of leadership, the value of the individual in society, and things like that.

4. **Citizen Genet and the Syrian Refugee Problem:** I just did this lesson this week and it worked really well. You could do a lesson that frames the reasons why Syrian refugees want access to the US. You could compare this to the reasons why Citizen Genet came to America in the 1790s. With that as a backdrop, you can ask students: What would Thomas Jefferson do about the Syrian refugees?

5. **Just War:** Look up the Just War Theory and use it to assess any number of military actions over the years. You could also add readings from anyone who was opposed to the war and genuinely consider their pacifist arguments. Are they practical?

6. **Moral Heroes:** As a culminating assessment, have students choose their "moral heroes" from a given era or unit (or an entire class). Choosing our moral heroes is crucial to forming our values. It forces us to really think and it gives us someone we can aspire to be.

7. **Forgiveness:** When are nations/people owed forgiveness? When is the time for a Georgian to forgive William Tecumseh Sherman? Japan to forgive the US for the nuclear bomb? The US to forgive al-Qaeda for 9/11? This can be a straight ethics discussion about forgiveness or you can utilize the historical facts/circumstances to evaluate what matters in forgiving.

8. **Cultural Relativism:** Can a culture be right or wrong? Do other nations have the right to intervene in another land who has a different culture? For example, should a neighboring country intervene if a culture is carrying out a large number of "honor killings" of women? Obviously, there are many examples of this, many of which reflect incidents of intervention.

9. **An Ethical President:** Jimmy Carter is one of those presidents that is considered to be a genuinely good person. Analyze his presidency, his times, his character and facilitate a conversation (or make a comparison to another president?): is it possible for there to be an ethical president? Can a president stick to his principles? Is it right for a president to stick to his convictions or is he/she responsible to the voters?

General:

1. **A Rough Night for the Ethics Board:** You can do this for medical ethics, or "during war time", or for a "government oversight committee." Set up whatever scenario you want. Then, post a series of ethical dilemmas around the room. Have students move around to each scenario and write down what they believe is the ethical thing to do. Give them very little time to decide at each station. The point is to get conversations going about right and wrong. The reason for the speed and variety of the cases is to make the point that we need to think about moral dilemmas in advance; you won't have a lot of time to think when they really come up! You need to begin to develop your ethical outlook in advance.

2. **When Personal Ethics are used to Apply to Others:** Choose a moral hero who spoke out against injustice. Then facilitate an activity/discussion that explores the question: "When is it acceptable to apply one's private morality to others?"

3. **Lying for State Secrets:** There are plenty of examples of this: Oliver North, Richard Nixon, James Snowden...When is it ethical to lie? Is it morally justified to lie in order to protect state secrets? Is it ethical for states to have state secrets?

4. Tackle an Issue Like Utilitarianism, Absolutism, or other Ethical Theories

5. **Writing Assignments:** Check out the "Easy Essays" tab and you'll find a writing assignment that might be useful. I have posted a bunch of student examples and provided a link to the "Easy Essays" of the Catholic Worker website.

6. **Connecting Past and Present:** On many occasions, I have required students to write essays showing what they have learned in class--about the government, the economy, history--with an eye towards how their new knowledge relates to the world today. I then require them to send those essays to a proper person: a newspaper op-ed column, a political figure, the school superintendent, etc. Most recently, we completed an essay where focused on a reformer from the Progressive Era. The essay required them to explain why we could use a specific reformer to return to help society today. One student's title: "Why We Need More Upton Sinclair Today" Great stuff!

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