

Biography and U.S. History in the 20th Century

As we study history we are aware of the role of individuals who make decisions that affect the rest of society. Students who develop the skill of critical thinking are an asset to American democracy. In this unit students will work with ideas of individuals, who have shaped and changed history.

NCSS Standards

1. Chronology and Cause. Students will understand the chronological order of historical events and recognize the complexity of historical cause and effect, including the interaction of individual choices and actions.
2. Historical Understanding. Students will understand the meaning, implications, and import of historical events,
3. Research, Evidence, and Point of View. Students will acquire the ability to frame questions that can be answered by historical study and research; to collect, evaluate, and employ information from primary and secondary sources, and to apply it in oral and written presentations.

Time Frame: The unit can be a mid year or end of year activity. The approach could be used in a project based learning class. The teacher may decide to spend one to two days a week over a term or take a two week block of time for the project.

Grade Level: The lessons are applicable to grade 8 or 10 U.S. history classes of varying abilities.

Skills

1. Complete a graphic organizer that includes values, talents, and skills/or events in the life of an individual who took a stand in history.
2. Read a secondary and a primary source on the individual.
3. Construct a poster or Power Point that includes the research (Key events, information on values and skills, images from the individual's life, and words.
4. Reflect in a 300-word essay on what the person stood up for and how they came to make this stand in history as well as what the student learned from their unit study.

Content: The list below considers some of the individuals studied in depth during the TAH Year Three Program on the Twentieth Century and Constitutional Issues. Therefore, the individuals are names that most students will recognize in their U.S. history texts. These include Presidents, women writers and political figures, generals, inventors, innovators, and African American leaders. These were individuals who took a stand in the many controversial issues of the century, including war, suffrage, environmental degradation and conservation, lynching, child labor, civil rights in schools and sports, the bomb, providing healthcare to the poor, encouraging new technologies of communication and transportation.

T. Roosevelt
H. Taft
Wilson
Harding
Coolidge
Hoover
F. Roosevelt
Truman
Kennedy
Jane Addams
Frances Perkins
Eleanor Roosevelt
Rachel Carson
Carrie Chapman Catt
Margaret Sanger
McArthur
Patton
Eisenhower
Jackie Robinson
Thurgood Marshall
M.L. King
Jacob Riis
Lewis Hine
John Dewey
Steinbeck
Wright Brothers
Einstein
Edison
Henry Ford
Lindbergh

Assessments

Each lesson includes formative assessments of ongoing student work in a folder or portfolio. The project of images and writing provides a summative score.

Lesson 1: Brainstorming and Cooperative Learning on Individuals in History

Essential Questions:

1. What does it mean, “to take a stand?”
2. Which individuals in US history have taken stand on an issue or at an event that affected others?
3. Do some people have more than one stand in history?

Activities:

INTRODUCING THE UNIT AND CONCEPTS

Ask students to discuss what it means to take a stand i.e. standing up for something for which they believe in their own lives, in what they have seen their coaches or parents do, or from conversations with their grandparents.

Write student responses on an overhead transparency. Give each student a folder that will be used for this unit. Students write down the classroom meaning of “Taking a Stand in History” under that heading and with the date.

DISCUSSION IN SMALL GROUPS

On the classroom walls you may want to display laminated photos of 20th century figures.

With three-five persons in a pre-designated cooperative learning groups, students generate a list of at least 10 people they have heard of or read about in U.S. history that they think took a stand. The goal is to generate many names so that students will have a choice when they select the person they will research. Students write these down on lined paper in any order with the stand in history beside the person’s name.

CATEGORIZING

Then the class as a whole determines categories under which historians might arrange these individuals. A goal is to find people who have similar characteristics, such as: decade (s) of the 20th century in which they influenced American life male/female; where they accomplished their stand; whether they were the leader of a movement; whether they broke a barrier for the rights of people.

SHARING KNOWLEDGE

Cooperative Learning Groups review their list and classify individuals by the agreed upon characteristics. While student groups discuss, the teacher puts up large paper taped on the walls with students’ headings.

Scribes from each group go to large papers taped on the walls of the room and writes with marker in large lettering the names of the famous people

under the agreed-upon categories. Each group shares their level of knowledge about the people and the stand the people took in history.

SELF-SELECTED ASSIGNMENT

in their folder students write down three of the names from the class lists of individuals that they may want to research and why they are interested in those individuals.

ASSESSMENT BASED ON THE LESSON

Homework: At home they look up the three people, make a decision on who they will research and print pages of biographical information on that person to bring to class. Students must include the site i.e the URL or source of this document at the bottom of the page. Students should highlight section (lines) in the article, which describe the stand the individual took in history.

For students, who have no computer access at home or who have no printer, the teacher prints pages.

Alternatively, the last part of this lesson could be started another day in computer lab to provide access to the biographical information.

Lesson 2: Identifying Characteristics of Individuals who Take a Stand

Essential Questions:

1. What was the important stand the individual took?
2. What are values, talents, and skills? Give examples of each.
3. What values, talents, skills, and/or events of the early family life of a person affect an individual and his/her stand in history?

Activities:

REVIEW OF HOMEWORK

In pairs, students share what they highlighted about persons in history and the stand they took from their homework assignment. Buddies help each other to ensure each understands “taking a stand in history.” Students raise questions.

Each student writes down in their folders the stand the individual took in history.

INTRODUCTION OF NEW CONCEPTS

Large group discussion arrives at the definition of values, talents, and skills, by discussing these in terms of the lives of students and families. Also, raise questions about what events may alter a person’s life and either help or hinder them from a goal or dream. Teacher puts the ideas on the board, overhead transparency, or types into a document on the computer, using an LCD projector for projection.

THINK-PAIR-SHARE

Students take their print out biographies and identify by writing in the margin of their printouts these words: values, talents, skills, or events of the individual’s early life that later affect their stand in history.

Student pairs read each other’s notes to affirm choices and definitions.

After the class discusses essential questions #2 and #3, students write in their notebooks, using Lesson 2 heading. Students give an example from the life of the individual whose short biography they brought to class.

ASSESSMENT BASED ON LESSON

Homework: Students complete a graphic organizer using their information. Students of varying abilities can all meet the requirements. Lower achieving students complete at least one phrase and example in each of the categories: events, values, talents, and/or skills. High achieving students aim for one to three examples in each category. Teacher modeling should be done before the assignment.

Graphic Organizer for Individual Taking a Stand in History

Name of student _____

Name of Historical Person _____

What was their stand in history? _____

Events

Description	Example from the Person's Life
1	
2	
3	

VALUES

Description	Example from the Person's Life
1	
2	
3	

TALENTS

Description	Example from the Person's Life
1	
2	
3	

SKILLS

Description	Example from the Person's Life
1	
2	
3	

Lesson 3: Using Historical Sources

Essential Questions:

1. How do historical sources, such as primary sources and secondary sources differ? Give an example of each.
2. What do quotations by an individual in history tell us about the person and the times in which they are living?

Activities:

REVIEW HOMEWORK

Students pair up and share what they learned about their individual in relation to values, talents, skills and events by sharing what they wrote for homework.

Volunteers share information from one of the categories of the graphic organizer with the entire class.

INTRODUCING CONCEPTS

Using LCD projection or handouts, teacher models how to use an online archive and retrieve primary sources. Review the terminology of secondary and primary source.

COMPUTER LAB RESEARCH: Primary Source Research

In the computer lab students search for sources of information written by the person, such as quotations from speeches, journal entries, or books the individual may have written.

Cut and paste at least ten quotes of one to five lines into a Microsoft Word document and include URL, so that if the student is creating a PowerPoint they can return to the site. If the quote has a date or place, include this information.

ASSESSMENT ON THE LESSON

Homework: Students read the print out with the quotations and select at least five which they will put on their poster board or include in their PowerPoint. In folders on a separate sheet of paper identify the number of the quote and explain what you think the quote means and what you think it tells you about your individual.

Lesson 4: Determining how to use Historical Information

Essential Questions:

1. Why does historical information about an individual person's life sometimes differ? Give examples of perspective and the importance of access to information.

Activities

INTRODUCING CONCEPT OF HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE AND AVAILABILITY OF SOURCES

Use several newspapers or magazines of conservative to liberal perspectives and have students read an article about a modern day person whose decisions are being described by the journalist. Have pairs share the news account, which the teacher has given them. Not everyone has the identical news story; some facts are not in each person's account. Discuss sources of information and why some facts in a biography of a person could be missing.

COMPUTER LAB/ LIBRARY WORK

Students locate on line, in a textbook, or on the library shelf, another secondary source of information (other than the first print out biography for their individual). They print the article and while reading the second article on the individual the student marks it up, looking for the events, values, talents, and/or skills that affected the stand the person took in history.

Students compare their first article with the second and may either complete a second graphic organizer or add the new areas they have learned about the person they are studying. They are doing what historians must do to interpret history, select the contemporary and later accounts that help explain the person's life.

Students write a paragraph in which they include a topic sentence, a thesis, and supporting details for one to three of the events of the individual's life along with the values, talents, and/or skills of the individual who took a stand.

ASSESSMENT OF LESSON

Homework: Students continue writing the introductory paragraph with topic sentence, thesis, and supporting details (use a "framed paragraph" for slower learners). This assessment is tiered for writing requirements and for scoring. The most advanced students should read a full length biography as a secondary source.

Lesson 5 Putting Together Your Research

Essential Questions

1. In a person's decision to take a stand in history, how important are the values of: personal freedom, individual responsibility, equality of opportunity, justice for all, the rule of law, tolerance of diversity, and respect for human dignity? Give examples.

Activities:

PAIR CRITIQUE AND SHARE

- Student pairs critique each other's paragraph using the model format.
- Student volunteers share what they have learned thus far about their person.

INTRODUCING NEW CONCEPTS

First in class discussion, then in small groups discuss the meaning of personal freedom, individual responsibility, equality of opportunity, justice for all, the rule of law, tolerance of diversity and respect for human dignity, calling forth examples from students' lives in school, with their families, in the community, in the nation, and in the world.

Students write down definitions of these phrases in their folders under the heading for the lesson and date their notes. Teacher writes class definitions on overhead transparency, on the board, or types into a word document and uses the LCD projector.

PAIRS

Student pairs discuss the essential question of today's lesson in relation to the person they researched and students write out a response of today's essential question for the person they researched. Students help each other decide on whether the values were key to the stand in history.

Students reread the biographical articles about their individuals in history and review what talents, skills, or events in the person's life were key to their taking the stand in history in light of today's discussion.

ASSESSMENT ON LESSON

Homework: Students revise, add onto, or create a new paragraph with a topic sentence, thesis, and supporting details using the information from the reading and discussion.

Lesson 6: Going Beyond to Analyze and Interpret

Essential Question:

To what extent does any of the following influence a person to take a stand in history: where they live; social class; type of government in the society; role of the military; religious principles; science and technology; the creative arts; or economics?

Activities:

Each cooperative learning group of three students defines the phrases used in one part of the seven in the essential question. Each group needs to brainstorm examples of (GRIPES): what do they know about their lives that would be different if they lived in a different geographical location; under a non-democratic government; under military rule; without our technology, science, art, music, or education; another religious or philosophical background; a more structured society; or a different kind of economy.

Class discussion of the relative or significant importance of the GRIPES.

Students write reflectively on the individual's life and summarize which of the eight influences affected *what happens after* the individual makes their stand in history. Model format is provided by the teacher.

Lesson 7: Synthesizing Our Knowledge

Essential Question

What are the ways to persuade others of the importance of a person who took a stand in history?

ASSESSMENT

On either a poster board or PowerPoint students include this information: DOB and DOD; key events in the person's life; statements about their values, skills, and talents using examples from their lives; typed quotations by the person taking the stand; five images of the individual printed from the computer; and a catchy title.

Students include a paragraph about the stand the person took in history and how it influenced others. Students use information they summarized from activities in Lessons 5 and 6.

Also, students prepare a 300-word statement of: how they did their project; the historical sources they used; and a reflective paragraph on what they learned in terms of concepts, skills, and understanding.

Alternative Presentations: skit, video, or museum style exhibit with objects.

This constructive aspect of the unit takes about three days, including the use of the computer lab and library. One to two days are necessary for the presentations.

New Deal Use of Documentary Photography: Migrant Mother

Over the course of this third summer of the Teaching American History grant, I learned more about how technological changes affected citizens' rights under the Constitution. The era of Presidential leadership under Franklin Delano Roosevelt saw the expansion of the role of the federal government into many aspects of American life. Faced with the Depression, the President called for social programs effecting major shifts in income distribution. Documentary photography became vital to New Deal programs when FDR decided in 1933 to establish a federal agency to use this technology to promote social justice for the poor. The images of the suffering American citizens were instrumental in changing attitudes of the public and Congress. I was interested in finding out more about how photographers became agents of change.

One of these photographers, Dorothea Lange, went out on assignment in 1936 to take photos of a labor camp in Nipomo, California. The federal government hired her to document the problems of migrant farmers, who left their farms in the Midwest Dust Bowl to find work in the West. In a series of pictures Lange captured the mother, thirty-two-year old Florence Thompson, her teen-age daughter, her toddlers and her baby. We see a worn face, torn clothing, ramshackle shelter and disorganized life. Contentment, self-respect and cleanliness are missing (Levine 1988, 23). The photograph represented "the helpless, the guiltless" who were "unvanquished by the implacable wrath of nature," yet pondering what will become of them (16). Both for its haunting message and its tasteful arrangement, the image entitled Migrant Mother, became one of the most widely reproduced photographs of the Depression.

The photograph presents a moment of truth in black and white. Here is an image of the poor. Who is responsible for this misery? This mother shows us how hard her life is yet in her visage we detect a reserve of strength and goodness. We admire her in her struggle. We see her choices are limited. The image leaves the viewer asking: what can I do to help this woman out of her desperation and what can our government do to help alleviate the suffering? Here is a "timeless Madonna," humble, worried with her children clinging to her for protection and security. We are haunted by her sorrow (Trachtenberg 1988, 68). Our eyes tell us that despite the perilous situation, this woman has a sense of dignity and self worth in the face of poverty (Levine 22). Trachtenberg views this work as "humanitarian realism" projecting an image of sacredness.

When Dorothea Lange presented the realities of life for the rural poor in her photographs of the 1930s, she did not see herself as a sociologist seeking to influence change. For example, she never inquired after the name of the woman whose image she made immortal, the four daughters, or the husband. When asked about this, her response was that she had recorded the essence of migrant work in her photographs. The woman and other people she photographed were "types: migrant farmers, sharecroppers, desperate mothers, ragged children" (25). Lange viewed herself as an artist doing a job of composing a portrait; her job was not to record historical information about her subjects. That was the work of others as her husband Paul Taylor, with whom she later completed a documentary book of their travels, *An American Exodus* (1940).

Lange's personal commentary about the photo, *Migrant Mother* is that she was filming an event of the time in the lives of real people. It was raining and she had seven hours to get home. But she was drawn to the scene "like a magnet." She used her own

creative, extraordinary eye in selecting subject and composition. For this final shot in a series of six, she removed the stained tent canvas, the kerosene lamp, the battered trunk and the empty plate. She directed the daughters to turn away from the camera, but rested gently on mother's shoulders. She asked the mother to delicately put her hand to her face. Lange said, "She seemed to know that my pictures might help her, so she helped me" (Coles 1995, 76). At the same time, when Lange's work appeared in the October 17, 1936 *Midweek Pictorial* the headline "Look in her Eyes," accompanied an article indicting the inequities of farm tenancy and demanding change (Levine 34). The image served as an instrument to effect change. "Lange was aware that she was showing the waste, the cheapness, the meanness of life." She was consciously making choices of what to include and leave out. In doing so, she was imposing "truth" on the scene (Coles 1995, 150-161).

In fact, Lange's job was created at the behest of President Roosevelt. By Executive Order in April 1935, he created the Resettlement Administration with Columbia University economics professor Rexford G. Tugwell, as administrator. The mission of the agency was to alleviate rural poverty by assisting dislocated farmers through resettlement in greenbelt towns, retraining them, or giving out loans. Louis Stryker, a graduate assistant for Tugwell, was in charge of recording the history of the period. In December 1936, fearful that the agency might become too socialistic, Congress transferred the agency to the Department of Agriculture, under Henry Wallace, renaming the agency the Farm Security Administration (FSA). However, the influence of Tugwell was evident in Stryker's assignments to photographers, directing them to connect the economics, history, sociology and cultural geography of the locations and people.

The Information Division hired filmmakers and photographers to inform the public on the problems of the Dust Bowl and the unwise land use that led to problems of flood control of the Mississippi. Lange was one of many photographers who worked for the government; others were Ben Shahn, Edward Hopper, Walker Evans, Margaret Bourke White, and Arthur Rothstein. Their photos accompanied feature stories that appeared in newspapers and periodicals throughout the country (Fleischhauer 1988, 4-5). Indeed Stryker noted that the files of photos should be considered a "monumental document comparable to the tombs of the Egyptian Pharaohs or to the Greek temples" (Trachtenberg 1988, 45).

In conclusion, Lange's work is significant for reasons beyond the beauty of her art. First, Lange's work attests to the belief in individuals and the dignity of the hardworking family. "She roamed America celebrating the variety and robustness of our people in the tradition of Walt Whitman" (Coles 178). Second, Lange created a documentary view of aspects of American rural life ignored before her time, expressing its pastoral and predatory nature (158). She shows us both human erosion- people becoming worn and vulnerable, and the erosion of the American land (112). Finally, Lange's work became an agent for change; her photography helped the Roosevelt administration gain the support for social justice programs for the small farmer in America. In the classroom, a study of the effects of the Depression on Americans becomes clear in the technically sharp images and in the message they communicate to the viewer. A study of contemporary photos, such as *Migrant Mother*, will help students to understand these primary sources and how media creates both voice and symbol. Photography may mirror reality in its documentary approach, but the viewer needs to be

aware of the artist has both purpose and perspective. The photograph is an attempt to balance objective truth and subjective beauty or conscience.

President Roosevelt encouraged the publishing of 80,000 documentary photographs of the downtrodden, thereby using art as a way to educate the public of his goal of social justice, a society based on more equality for all (Fleischhauer 1988, 2). The President's decision to set up an agency, whose job would be to graphically show the plight of the impoverished through this art form, immeasurably enhanced the success of the President's New Deal programs. Effectively, the New Deal applied managerial organization and technical means, using works such as *Migrant Mother* to further economic opportunities and restructure society and government.

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